

LISETTE MARSHALL



THE
SPINSTER &
THE THIEF

A FIVE KINGDOMS NOVELLA

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PROLOGUE

‘Oh,’ the tall countess behind Garreth cooed to her conversation partner, her voice blending in with the flutes and fiddled in the background of the ball, ‘I am *so* fond of horse races as well, my lord!’

Garreth scoffed as he walked on through the broad marble galleries of the king’s palace. Three weeks ago, he was quite sure, he had heard the same lady claim a principled aversion towards those barbaric betting fests to another gentleman, who had apparently lost interest since. Behind him, he just heard the first part of the new target’s answer.

‘I am of course in the happy situation that my finances allow me a little bet every now and then...’

Again Garreth scoffed. He couldn’t help it. In the parts of town where bailiffs and gamblers came for a beer at night, it was common knowledge that the fellow’s house stood on the brink of financial ruin, not in the least because of some persistent gambling habits. The tall woman didn’t seem to be aware. Her high, loud laugh behind him didn’t sound as if she’d soon give up the chase, at least.

Liars. The word sang through his mind as he made his way through the brightly coloured, gem-covered crowd, towards the larger ballroom where the musicians were feigning a mood of cheerful excitement. Liars and pretenders, all of them – the men muttering insincere compliments to any woman who would listen, the women morphing into any creature a man might like, the chaperones who watched them like hawks along the walls and pretended this was the only acceptable way to lead a noble life.

A young girl bumped into him, jumped back and already started fluttering her eyelashes at him before she had even fully regained her balance. Garreth gave her a quick nod and walked on without waiting for her doubtlessly eloquent apology. If he was unlucky she would string him on for a conversation of an hour, and he had no desire to spend that much time in this cursed place.

By reflex he threw a glance around as he entered the ballroom. No familiar faces in sight.

He sauntered along the wall, studying the coats and purses lying on the chairs and benches to his right. Precious silk coats, the occasional gilt hand-mirror, none

of them worth the hassle – but *there*...

Two golden bracelets, tucked away between the folds of a purple velvet coat. Garreth stood still and scoffed for what felt like the thousandth time. The gold edges of the bands were inscribed with a pattern of lilies – which suggested that this priceless jewellery had been given to its owner by an admirer from Summervale. She must have taken the gold off not to deter any other candidates.

Liars and pretenders, all of them.

He bent over and picked up the coat, with a carefully crafted air of entitlement. Most evenings that was enough to keep people from asking questions. Tonight he was unlucky: an elderly woman resembling an aggressive beaver stepped forward and snapped, ‘I beg your pardon, young man? What were you planning to do with Lady Talia’s coat?’

‘Lady Talia?’ He forced a disarming grin. ‘Oh, apologies, I must have the wrong one, then – my friend Lady Karolin sent me to fetch hers, she said it would be purple velvet.’

There was probably a Lady Karolin around in this place. If not, the woman before him would never admit she didn’t know this particular pupil. His hands moved quickly behind the fabric of the coat as he spoke, sliding the bracelets into the pockets of his trousers; then he stepped back and draped the piece back over the chair where he had found it, with exaggerated carefulness. The older woman’s face softened.

‘Well, it is very courteous of you to help your friend a hand. I believe someone left a purple coat on the bench beside the stage as well, could that be the one?’

‘Oh, thank you so much. I’ll take a look.’ Another slightly awkward grimace. ‘Apologies for the misunderstanding – all these coats look alike to me.’

‘Oh, that’s alright,’ she said, on a tone as if she was granting him the blessing of the century, and waved him off. Garreth turned around, rolled his eyes, and made his way to the stage at the head of the hall. Only when at least a dozen dancing couples had come between him and the beaver-like lady did he change course again. Out the nearest door, through the galleries where courting couples were spouting their lies at each other, back into the dark garden.

The weight of the gold was pressing against his thigh, and nobody came after him.

CHAPTER 1

Something was horribly wrong about this evening's ball.

The feeling of dread hit as soon as Zovinar set her first foot into King Ulrick's ballroom. Even the lively fiddles and flutes couldn't take it away, or the brilliance of the glass chandeliers and the gem-covered dresses, or the tempting scents of fresh fruit and ladies' perfumes. Under the chorus of bright voices and delighted laughter, the ominous glances were all the more obvious, the piercing whispers, the tense shoulders underneath the silk and lace. Most of all, the broad-shouldered men who had joined the governesses along the walls.

'Aren't they *handsome*?' Elena hissed next to her, clutching her hands around Zovinar's arm. Under her tiara, her bulging eyes shone with dangerous excitement. 'Those *muscles*... Oh, I believe one just *looked* at me!'

'They're – armed,' Zovinar said.

'Yes, of course they're armed. They're *knights*, silly.'

Silly. Zovinar swallowed the rest of her words, averting her eyes – yes, of course. Knights. But she had never seen so many of them attending any ball before, and after four years in Copper Coast, that went to say something.

'I suppose they're here because the queen will attend today,' Alis cut in from behind them, her slow, wailing voice higher than usual. 'To protect her and the prince.'

'They weren't here last time the queen came to a ball,' Zovinar said, and Alis sent her a look of thinly veiled superiority and commiseration.

'Oh, yes, that must have been *long* before my time...'

Because *I* didn't spend four years at the court of love without securing a single man's heart, the undertone in her voice said. Actually, *I* haven't been here for more than half a year and already the counts and earls are vying for my interest. Zovinar swallowed again, forced a smile and said, 'Yes, she doesn't come to see us often, does she?'

'And why would she,' an amused voice added, and Viviette joined their conversation, smiling sourly. 'Could think of better ways to spend the evening.'

Zovinar suppressed the urge to shuffle backwards. Not that Viviette looked all that threatening, frail and fragile in her red velvet dress – but somehow the crown

princess of the Peaks, with that stubborn gleam of mocking amusement in her eyes, always managed to make her feel twice as stupid as she already tended to be.

At her arm, Elena gasped, 'Viviette! What an outrageous thing to say!'

'Pretty sure she's only showing up to see how the theft issue plays out,' Viviette said, shrugging. 'Didn't you hear? They'll be searching everybody who leaves the castle tonight. If the thief shows up again...' Her smile dwindled. 'Well, he has a problem.'

Zovinar swallowed. She didn't want to think about the types of problem that would take even the indifferent smile from Viviette's face.

'I wouldn't be surprised,' Elena said, with a gleam of obvious enthusiasm in her eyes, 'if they have him *quartered* when they finally catch him!'

'Oh, don't be ridiculous,' Viviette said. 'They haven't quartered anyone in Copper Coast for fifty-seven years. They're not going to exhaust their horses because of some bracelets, even if –'

'No just the *bracelets*, Viviette!' Alis interrupted. 'If only they had just been simple bracelets – but Talia got them from Lord Callan, and he was *so* angry she lost them that he might well give up on their courtship entirely! The poor girl!'

'She wouldn't have been in trouble if she hadn't taken them off in the first place.'

'But she was *dancing*! Of course she –'

'With another fellow, wasn't she?' Viviette said, with a chuckle. 'Not surprising that Callan was unhappy. I don't think Ulrick is going to reinstate barbaric execution methods just because Lady bloody Talia didn't get her wedding with –'

'Viviette, your *language*!'

Viviette snorted. 'Oh, please. Anyway, I wouldn't get your hopes up about the quartering. But I suppose Ulrick will hang him, so if you play it well, that might already be enough excitement to faint in some knight's arms.'

Elena closed her eyes and muttered, '*Imagine...*'

Zovinar opened her mouth, then hesitated. She was probably about to say something stupid, after all.

'I still think hanging would be *far* too easy on him,' Alis said. 'After all the –'

'He would be *dead*,' Zovinar blurted out. 'How's that easy on anyone?'

Viviette threw her an impenetrable look, but before Zovinar could apologise or quickly move back to the subject of handsome knights, Alis already rolled her eyes and said, 'He ruined *lives*, did you forget?'

'I hardly suppose he did it for the fun of it! Imagine being desperate enough to steal from a king's court.'

'Oh, *silly* Zovinar,' Elena said, with a breathless laugh. 'He should just go find a job if he's that desperate! They always need hands around the farms, my father says.'

‘Ah, yes,’ Viviette said. ‘The comfortable life on the farms. Unimaginable he didn’t think of that.’

Alis looked like she was about to snap something about Lady Talia’s predicaments, but the moment she opened her mouth, a silky voice interrupted her. ‘Lady Alis?’

At once the annoyance melted from her face, leaving a sugary sweet smile behind. Her listless voice suddenly sounded unusually lively. ‘Oh, Lord Kerris! How delightful to see you again! I must have missed you at the ball last week?’

‘Urgent family business, you must know how it is – but I was wondering if you would perhaps do me the honour of your first dance this evening?’

‘How could I refuse such a request!’ Alis quickly took off her heavy, emerald-lined coat and stuck it into Zovinar’s arms. ‘Zovinar, dear, *surely* you will be so good to take care of my coat for a minute?’

She walked off without waiting for an answer, laughing unnaturally loud at something Kerris whispered to her.

Zovinar somehow suppressed the urge to drop the coat and watch it be trampled by dancing feet. Viviette’s face didn’t betray the pity she doubtlessly felt; Elena’s cheerful sighs were less subtle.

‘Oh, isn’t it *lovely*, the way he looks at her? Although she really shouldn’t be wearing that minty green again – it really doesn’t compliment her complexion at *all*, and –’

‘Look,’ Zovinar interrupted her. ‘What should I do with this coat, now? Because if I just put it on one of the benches...’

‘I wouldn’t keep walking around with it all evening, if I were you,’ Viviette said, and Zovinar flinched. Yes, of course. Stupid question. She would look ridiculous, hauling around with another girl’s coat. She should put it on the chairs where everyone left their heavy clothes and jewellery – but there was still a thief on the loose, and after weeks of mysterious disappearances, wouldn’t it be a little careless to let a handful of emeralds lie about unguarded?

‘Perhaps we shouldn’t take our most expensive pieces with us as long as there’s a thief running off with things,’ she suggested sheepishly. Elena was already snorting before she had finished the sentence.

‘Leave our jewellery at home? And our dresses too, then? Why not just appear on the balls *naked*?’

‘I doubt the handsome knights would object,’ Viviette said dryly. ‘Then again – oh, gods, there he is again. Well, lovely to have seen you for a minute tonight.’

The next moment a tall earl emerged, with a few rehearsed remarks on sleepless nights and unbridled longing. Viviette gave him the blandest of smiles.

‘You quite flatter me. I suppose you’d like to dance?’

‘Oh, you always understand me so well, Your Highness.’

With a laugh that sounded suspiciously like a snort, Viviette allowed him to lead her to the dancefloor. Elena heaved another sigh.

‘She can be so *mean* – as if she doesn’t know some of us would *kill* for such attention.’

Was it an attempt at sympathy? A gentle reminder that Zovinar should perhaps consider killing for her attention, since little else had worked so far?

‘Well –’

‘Oh, there’s Renwick!’ Elena cried out, interrupting her. ‘I must make sure he notices me! If he ignores me *another* week Alis will laugh at me...’

And she was gone, leaving Zovinar alone between the bubbling conversations, with Alis’s minty coat still in her arms. Nobody even turned to glance at her. After four years at the court, she had become as much as a part of the furniture.

She put the coat away on an empty chair at the wall, then turned back to the dazzling room and tried to give the impression she was going somewhere. The night blurred into all those other nights while she wandered through the ballroom, and tried not to exist – the music blending in with the whispers and cries and giggles around her, the faces of the attendees painfully familiar wherever she looked. She had seen them all arrive at King Ulrick’s court. All those who had been here before her had returned to their homes and castles again, and yet here she was, still silly, still utterly unmarried.

Why did she even make the effort of dressing up, every week again? Another silly question – Uncle Rusuvan would be angry if she didn’t. And yet, after four years... How could he still hold any hope she would find an acceptable suitor one day?

She found herself drifting out of the room, into the quieter, calmer corridors. Courting couples were smiling loving smiles at each other under every arch, like she had dreamed anyone might smile at her once. A painful sight, but at least nobody paid attention to her here; even the chaperones observing the conversations knew better than to suspect her of unbecoming behaviour. Around a corner, another corner, going nowhere in particular. Perhaps, she mused, she could simply keep wandering her rounds for the rest of the night and not speak with any other living soul until they were all sent home again...

Before her, a young man she didn’t know stepped from the shadows.

It took her a heartbeat to realise the peculiarity of the situation. The man was dressed like a nobleman. He looked just like the dozens of young men flooding Copper Coast in their search for a suitable wife – he moved like a nobleman, he smiled like a nobleman, he walked straight past her like most noblemen did these days.

But she didn’t *know* him.

When had she last not known anyone in this place?

She stood frozen until he was well behind her, the sound of his footsteps on the marble floor tiles calm and determined. Then, abruptly, her confusion gave way, allowing through a feeling far sharper and uglier.

A sudden suspicion, catching the breath in her throat. An unknown face. A man sneaking through these corridors as if he belonged here. Lady Talia's bracelets last week.

The young man disappeared around the corner as Zovinar jolted around. In a surge of sudden resolve she lifted her skirts and hurried after him, the soles of her dancing shoes uncomfortably loud against the marble. There she saw just the last glimpse of his grey velvet costume disappear into another gallery – not the gallery leading back to the ballroom, but one that would bring him into the extended gardens of the court.

Going out. Barely an hour after the ball had opened. Quite as if he was *fleeing*.

This was utterly stupid, she reminded herself. Why was she following him? Whether he was a thief or not, she was only bringing herself into trouble by running after him, the governesses would be unhappy about her escape from the safety of the ball, and imagine what Uncle Rusuvan would say if he heard about this folly!

But her feet kept moving. She didn't want to return to the ball. At least here she couldn't say anything silly, at least here the other ladies couldn't give her pitying glances with every step she took. Through the gallery, out into the garden indeed, onto the path where the knights would be waiting to search anyone leaving.

The knights.

And then, with a sensation like a lightning bolt hitting the back of her skull, she realised what was about to happen. The knights. Who wouldn't quarter him, perhaps, but she remembered how the smile had sunk from Viviette's face.

And her lips were already moving.

'Thief!'

Her voice echoed through the dark garden, tearing through the peaceful rustling of the trees and the burbling of the fountains. Before her, the silhouette of the young man abruptly came to a standstill.

Only then she realised how quiet the world was. Nobody even knew where she was. Oh, good gods. Stupid, Zovinar, very, very stupid – she should run, warn the knights and be happy nobody had hurt her...

But the blond man turned around to face her, and even in the darkness, his smile was disarming enough to make her freeze at the spot.

'My lady?'

His warm voice sounded friendly. Not like someone who'd habitually run off with the belongings of others. Not like someone who deserved to be hanged, either.

'Eh...' Zovinar stammered.

The man took three steps towards her, emerging from the shadows with his hands politely on his back. He looked far more handsome than she had imagined from that quick glimpse as he passed her. A gentle, slightly bashful smile. Blond curls, a short beard, and shoulders of the kind that might make Elena faint. A dark grey coat, made to measure. Good gods, what idiocy had she brought upon herself this time – of *course* this man couldn't be a thief, and imagine what the other girls would say if they heard about her senseless hunt at some innocent nobleman.

'My lady?' he repeated, tilting his head. 'Did I startle you? You sounded rather frightened?'

'I'm – I'm sorry,' Zovinar breathed. 'I thought just for a moment – I saw you walk by, and – well, people have been losing their jewellery for weeks.'

'Oh.' He laughed, and somehow didn't sound deeply offended. 'My apologies, again – you called for the guards, then?'

'No – no, I...'

The young man raised an eyebrow. 'Not?'

'I think I wanted to warn you,' she said sheepishly. Oh, good gods. What hole was she talking herself into this time? Why didn't she just nod? It would make her the type of woman to enjoy an occasional hanging, yes, but he didn't know her anyway – what did it matter?

'Warn me?'

'There are guards at the gate tonight.' Her words came out too fast now. 'Because of the thefts – to search everyone who leaves the court today – and – well, I obviously don't want anyone to steal anything, but...'

The man was staring at her, his smile sinking off his face. Zovinar stared back, unable to move or even blink. Around her, in the darkness, the trees rustled in a gust of wind, then became quiet again; in that silence, she could just hear the faraway murmur of voices and flutes. Nothing else. Not a word from the tall blond man standing barely ten feet away from her.

He didn't look so harmless anymore, suddenly.

'You...' she began, then fell silent again.

'Look,' he said, his voice sounding as if he was actively holding himself together, 'perhaps I should accompany you back inside and...'

'*Did* you steal those things?'

Her voice came out too loud. No living soul to help her, no-one who even knew where she had gone – what was she *doing*? Why wasn't she running? But if she ran, he would be faster. At least now he didn't move. He didn't back away from her. He just – stared.

'I'm sorry,' she managed. 'I should – I just wanted to –'

'*Warn* me?' he finished her sentence, shaking his head with a mirthless laugh. 'You were trying to *warn* me?'

'If they find anything they might hang you for –'

‘As you should want them to,’ he interrupted her, sharper now. His eyes had narrowed, peering at her through the dark with cold distrust; no trace of that friendly smile persisted in his bitter grimace. ‘Am I supposed to believe some lady covered in silver and silk just wants to *warn* me against the guards protecting her?’

Zovinar opened her mouth, and didn’t find the words. ‘But – you –’

‘Oh, piss off,’ he snapped. ‘I know your kind – you just wanted to help me from the goodness of your heart? Really? What do you want from me?’

‘Why would I want anything from you?’

‘Either you have something up your sleeve or you’re just plain stupid.’

Her knees buckled under her. She staggered away from him, away from the venom in his eyes, the sting in his voice – stupid. Even *here* she was stupid. And he was right, for hell’s sake, she should have been running minutes ago, back to the safety of the knights and the music and the sickening dances –

But he shot forward as she stumbled back, so quickly she barely had the time to scream.

His hands locked around her wrists like vices and drew her back towards him with relentless strength – a trained dancer’s move, but from a deadly, merciless dance that allowed no escaping. Zovinar’s cry drowned somewhere in the back of her throat. Her breath caught, giving in to the demand of his iron hold as her reflexes took over – don’t anger him. Don’t scare him. Don’t make a sound.

She swallowed and closed her mouth. The thief’s fingers didn’t loosen.

‘You’ll stay quiet?’ he hissed.

Zovinar closed her eyes and nodded. She no longer felt anything except for his hands on her lower arms – a blistering pressure, the threat of his touch radiating through her. Tears were burning behind her eyes. Stupid, *stupid* – the gods knew what he would do to her, and still nobody even knew where she had gone.

‘Now tell me,’ he continued, in that same, dangerously quiet hiss, ‘what in hell you wanted to achieve by telling me about –’

‘Please.’ The tears broke free, welling hot and painful in her eyes. ‘I’m so sorry – people were talking about how you would be hanged or quartered or whatever else – and then I saw you and didn’t want them to hurt you like that – I swear that’s all, I was just being stupid, please...’ Her voice gave in. ‘Please don’t hurt me...’

He abruptly pulled his hands off her, with a curse as if her skin was burning him. Zovinar gasped for breath and wobbled backwards, and this time he didn’t follow her; when she opened her eyes he had gone pale, rubbing his hands over his trousers as if to scrub the memory of her skin off his palms.

‘What?’

‘Forgive me.’ He sounded choked. ‘I – oh, gods be damned. Sorry. I shouldn’t – I’m not hurting you. I’m not a – I’m not...’

Zovinar stared at him, frozen in her place. *Now* at least she should run, the sensible part of her mind tried to tell her. She had to get out of here, have him

arrested and put him to the gallows where he belonged. But the disgust in his voice kept her in her place. The imprint of his fingers seemed etched into the skin of her wrist, tingling with a strange kind of warmth. No one had touched her for ages. Which should be all the more reason to want him with a noose around his neck –

‘Please,’ the thief interrupted her frantic thoughts, gesturing at the buildings behind her. ‘Go back inside. Don’t stay around here – don’t stay around me. You –’

‘But are you *alright*?’

He fell silent, staring at her as if she was a ghost. Zovinar swallowed and added, ‘I mean – you don’t look particularly fine?’

‘You...’ He uttered an incredulous laugh. ‘You’re asking if *I*’m alright?’

‘Those knights are still out there! If they catch you...’

‘Why in hell’s name would you *care*?’

A high falsetto interrupted her answer, coming from what seemed to be miles away. ‘Zovinar? *Zovinar*? Are you out there – *Zovinar*!’

Zovinar jolted around. A short silhouette came hurrying from the marble galleries, torchlight reflecting in the rings on her fingers and the gems in her ears. Oh, gods. Crisanta. At last someone had noticed her absence – but for her head governess to find her at this moment – in a pitch-dark garden – in this company –

‘Is she looking for *you*?’ the thief hissed behind her, and only then did it occur to her that he did not even know her name.

She nodded, and he cursed. ‘I really shouldn’t be...’

Crisanta froze, her ringed hand clutching her velvet dress. In the dark it was impossible to tell what she saw, but the mortification in her voice spoke volumes.

‘*Zovinar*!’

‘Don’t go anywhere!’ Zovinar whispered, her voice suddenly breaking. ‘Please, if you run off now she’ll think...’

‘What in hell do you want me to do then – walk back inside?’

‘You *have* to! Please!’

‘*Zovinar*!’ Crisanta hurried closer, her voice growing louder. ‘What in the world are you *doing* here, you stupid girl! Why would you go out in the dark on your own – and who...’ Her voice soared up. ‘Who is *this*?’

‘*Please*,’ Zovinar whispered, without turning around. ‘Please – if my uncle hears...’

‘*Zovinar*, good gods,’ Crisanta snapped, ‘don’t you have *ears*? Answer me!’

She opened her mouth, her mind a blank sheet of terror. Any moment she expected to hear the thief’s footsteps behind her, disappearing into the dark of the night – as if she had sneaked out to meet with some lover. And then they would all know, Alis and Elena and Viviette and all other Copper Coast girls, every single man who might still have felt inclined to marry her, Uncle Rusuvan...

‘I believe I must apologise, my lady,’ the thief said.

Now she heard his footsteps – but they were coming *closer*. Crisanta abruptly stood still, some twenty feet away, her bosom heaving under her pearls.

‘Now what in the world is going on here?’

‘Please blame my stupidity for this unbecoming situation.’ He sounded utterly charming and utterly harmless again, the voice of a man who wouldn’t touch a piece of gold if you dangled it in front of him. ‘I caught a glimpse of that damned thief – pardon me the wording – and was foolish enough to follow him into the garden alone. He noticed and attacked me. Had Lady Zovinar not cried alarm, I’m not sure how that might have ended. He fled when he heard her, thankfully.’ He stood next to her now, shoulders straight and head raised, the perfect gentleman. ‘I – eh – I must admit I considered following him. Lady Zovinar tried to discourage me. I should of course have brought her back inside at once, rather than –’

‘Good gods,’ Crisanta interrupted, her hand still on her heaving chest. ‘Well, I must commend your courage, Lord...’

‘Griffith,’ he helpfully finished, smiling her moment of awkwardness away. ‘I’m a cousin of the duke of Mirror Bay, you may know him?’

‘My word! Dear Howell’s cousin!’ The last of Crisanta’s anger vanished, replaced by the habitual coquettishness that tended to emerge around men she deemed respectable company for her pupils. ‘I see, I see – but please come inside, then, Lord Griffith! The knights can find that burglar easily enough, and poor Zovinar *really* shouldn’t stay out in this cold.’

Zovinar barely dared to breathe, but the thief’s voice didn’t betray a whiff of doubt. ‘Thank you so much – and my apologies again, I hadn’t imagined this would cause so much trouble.’

‘Oh, that’s alright,’ Crisanta said, waving his words away with sudden joviality. ‘And it was very brave of you to help Lord Griffith, Zovinar – very stupid, as well – but let’s just say, sometimes the heart gets in the brain’s way...’

CHAPTER 2

*W*hat in hell's name was he *doing*?

The halls and galleries opened up before Garreth in a haze of crystal and candlelight, satin and silver, marble and mahogany – a place as welcoming as the gates of hell itself. The ruby pendant he had stolen was burning in the pocket of his trousers. Why did he allow that old witch to drag him back inside? He should excuse himself, make up some pretty story and be off before anyone could recognise his face under his beard. If he spent too much time in these rooms he was bound to bump into someone from five years back, and if they recognised him, the ruby would be the last of his problems.

But the girl by his side – the fright in her voice. If he vanished without seeing eye to eye with the court, it would raise her governess's suspicions. If he wanted the old lady to keep believing he was indeed some heroic nobleman with no dishonourable intentions, at least he should endure the hall for a few minutes. Madness – rash, reckless madness – but the damned girl...

Are you alright?

Had she been serious? Because if she had been – what did that make of him?

Please don't hurt me...

He clenched his jaws and walked on. Curious glances and feverish whispers around them, but all new faces, the usual Copper Coast audience, where nobody stayed for more than some three years. Next to him, the governess was still talking. He had ignored the avalanche of words for a minute too long, he realised: she was listing all the friends she had to introduce him to as soon as possible.

'Please, my lady,' Garreth interrupted. It still came so easily, that deceptive politeness the court had once installed in him. 'I'm honoured by your warm reception, but after this incident – I hope you'll forgive me if I'm not quite in the mind for an evening of too much excitement. I will be glad to keep Lady Zovinar company for a little while, but I may not stay for long. Violence quite kills the festive spirit.'

'Oh, of *course*, Lord Griffith. I'll inform the knights of your confrontation, then, you shouldn't need to take that upon yourself as well.' She gave the quiet girl between them a stern look, as if to warn her never to walk into a garden again.

‘Zovinar, please do my nerves a favour and –’

‘I won’t be stupid again, Lady Crisanta.’ Her voice sounded flat, more so than outside, but Crisanta smiled.

‘Very well, Zovinar. Amuse yourself a little, then.’

Off she was, in an agitated cloud of velvet and pearls. Before them the gallery lay in a straight line to the ballroom itself – to the crowd of Ulrick’s court, dozens of eyes to notice him.

‘Thank you,’ Zovinar whispered beside him.

Abruptly the fear vanished, crushed under the weight of his embarrassment. *Thank you?* After he had stolen her friends’ rubies, insulted her in a dark garden and frightened her until she was nearly crying – *please don’t hurt me*. For the gods’ sake. He had never wanted to be *that* kind of a bastard, and he had been far, far too close a moment ago.

‘Least I could do,’ he said, without turning to look at her.

‘Yes, but – you don’t really like being here, do you?’

Garreth closed his eyes for a heartbeat. No. No, he didn’t like being here at all – but why in the world did she *care*? He damn well knew she hadn’t been raised to, at least. She had gotten what she wanted. It should be the end of the story. A few more minutes of polite conversation and he would have served his purpose for her.

Just wanted to warn you.

What in the world was she, this girl?

‘People might hang or quarter me if they realise who I am,’ he said, keeping his voice low. ‘Does it surprise you I’m not perfectly comfortable?’

She swallowed. ‘Yes. Sorry. Stupid question.’

Garreth turned towards her. She didn’t look him in the eye, her gaze focused on the floor as if she were some overly couth damsel – an epitome of good breeding and decent upbringing in her frost blue gown and her silver tiara, and yet she had stormed into a dark garden to warn him. It didn’t make sense. None of it made sense.

‘Look,’ he said, scraping his throat. Only a few people came walking through this corridor, but he felt every curious glance biting through his skin like a burning cut. ‘We should probably have some conversation. We’ll look strange if we just stand here silently. So – oh, hell – your name is Zovinar? You’re from Redwood, then?’

She gave him a thin smile – a perfect feeble lady’s smile, of the kind they practiced for hours in front of the mirrors in this place. ‘From the duchy of Tanglewood.’

‘Ah. Lovely.’ What else was he supposed to say? Is it some Tanglewood custom to sympathise with thieves and burglars? Any particular reason you’re still treating me like some gentleman after I all but squeezed my fingers through your arms? Questions he shouldn’t ask – was he really going to demand an explanation after all

he had already done to her? But nothing more conversational came to mind.

‘It’s not your real name, is it?’ Zovinar said.

‘What?’

‘Griffith.’ Again that timid smile, as if to convince him she was nothing more than that shallow, picture-perfect lady who would abide by the rules even if her life depended on it. Garreth was overcome by a strange, nearly violent desire to grab her by the shoulders and shake out the truth of her – what in the world was going on behind that pretty face? But before he could even raise a hand, she added, ‘I’ve never heard of a Griffith of Mirror Bay, at least. And I’ve been here for some time.’

A trace of bitterness shimmered through in those last words. Some time? But if it was a painful subject, he wasn’t going to ask for details.

‘I may have improvised a little,’ he admitted.

‘More than just a little, I’d say.’ She hesitated. ‘So what do you want me to call you?’

He raised his eyebrows. ‘Griffith isn’t good enough to you?’

‘It’s strange to call you by a name I already know to be a lie. I don’t even know if you’re really a lord. I mean...’ Her eyes ran over him, taking in his face, his clothes. Not an unpleasant sensation at all – not that that was a sensible thought. ‘You look quite like a lord. But you also looked quite like an honest man, so I probably shouldn’t rely on first impressions.’

Garreth couldn’t suppress a wry grin. Hell be damned. Something alarmingly clever was hiding behind those pretty manners, it turned out. ‘I’m not a lord.’

‘And yet you must have spent some time around the court. You blend in too easily not to have.’

‘Does it matter?’

‘We need to converse about something, don’t we?’ she said, with another timid smile. ‘And besides, I’m trying to understand...’

Again she hesitated. She did that a lot, he realised, pausing before she spoke, as if to weigh whether the words were worthy of leaving her lips. *I won’t be stupid again*, she had said to her governess. A peculiar thing to say; apart from the odd point that she cared about some thief’s life and limbs, she seemed the opposite of stupid. Who had made her believe she was? The training at Copper Coast again? Her governesses’ discipline, smothering every sharp edge, every suspicion of rebellion?

And yet it hadn’t destroyed the madness that had made her storm after him to warn him. Good gods. What else was hiding behind this ladylike charade?

But she was watching him quietly now, without finishing her sentence, as if she needed his permission to ask her question. Garreth smiled at her, feeling like a hunter attempting not to frighten a skittish animal.

‘You’re trying to understand?’

‘I’ve wondered about it all evening,’ she said, lowering her eyes. ‘Since people were talking about hanging you – why would you do this, break into the king’s ballroom and run off with our jewellery? It’s too dangerous to do it for the pleasure of it, I’d say.’

‘That’s correct, yes.’

She threw him a shocked, nearly suspicious glance from under her dark locks, as if he would start laughing at her the next moment. Garreth coughed and added, ‘You didn’t consider the possibility that I simply need money?’

She opened her mouth, closed it, hesitated. *I won’t be stupid again.* Hell’s sake, she shouldn’t intrigue him so much, this girl, and yet... How was he supposed to run into that blank wall of her demeanour without wondering what lay behind it?

‘You look like you have some reasonable argument to make,’ he said slowly. ‘What is it?’

‘Just...’ She swallowed. ‘I’m not quite an expert on thieving, so forgive me if I say anything ridiculous, but even if you’re desperate for money – there are easier targets than the king. You could rob a bank. Ambush some travelling nobleman. There are so many people around during these balls, paying attention to every new face...’

Garreth frowned. ‘Is that why you came after me?’

‘What?’

‘That I was a new face?’

‘I told you, I’ve been here for some time.’ Again she sounded bitter. ‘It doesn’t happen often I don’t recognise someone. It looked suspicious to me.’

‘You must admit,’ he said dryly, ‘it’s quite amusing that you unmasked a thief when an entire regiment of knights couldn’t.’

Finally, *finally*, another smile blossomed on her face – a rosy, radiant expression of quiet joy, looking nothing like those cultivated creations. Something twitched in his guts. It made her look too damn beautiful, that smile – gave sudden colour to her pale prettiness, sudden depth to her shallow performance. Not that he should care – of course he didn’t care – but at the very least he had been right to suspect an entirely different world below her surface.

Their eyes met, and she quickly looked away.

‘I – I hadn’t really considered myself an expert at catching thieves, either.’

‘Goes to show we all surprise ourselves sometimes,’ Garreth said. At least she surprised *him* – hell’s sake, he wanted to see that smile again. ‘So, what is your expert opinion on the next step? Do we keep standing here? People are giving us looks.’

She flinched, as if she only noticed the glances from the passers-by now. ‘Most people don’t stray away from the ballroom for so long. So perhaps – if you want – we should move that way?’

If he wanted. Was she concerned about *his* wishes now? But she wasn't wrong; if he didn't want the whispers to spread he should either leave or follow her to the ballroom now. Leaving would be wisest – but if he left now her governess might ask questions, and either way he had to admit he didn't quite feel like leaving.

'In that case,' he said, and held out his arm for her. 'My lady?'

Zovinar blushed – why in the world did she *blush*? She knew him for what he was. And yet her fingers on his sleeve felt impossibly gentle, as if she was afraid to break him. Did they see it, the eyes following them as they walked into the perfume-scented murmur of the ballroom – how his skin melted under that gossamer touch? The softness of her fingers tingled through him in the most disconcerting way, a softness evoking thoughts of silk blankets, warm lips, skin against skin...

His mind was running off with him, and he didn't manage to rein it in; he only barely suppressed a sigh of relief when she took her fingers off his arm again, in the most silent corner of the room. What did he think he was doing? Some prim lady from Ulrick's court – there was no reason for his thoughts to go *there*.

'Well, Lord Thief,' she said, so quietly it was almost a whisper. 'I think this is furthest away from the eyes I can get you, but if you want to move?'

'No, no, thank you. This is perfect.' He shook his head, an attempt to shake the sense back into his mind. 'So. What is the next step? More conversation, I believe?'

'I was not entirely done asking questions yet,' she said, then hastily added, 'If you don't mind.'

'I don't mind.' He didn't want to scare her back into that demure disposition, at least – and hell's sake, he had made her cry in a deserted garden barely half an hour ago. She shouldn't even be asking about his preferences.

'In that case...' Another hesitation. 'You didn't really answer me.'

'Answer what, exactly?'

'Why you're stealing from the king. Why you're sneaking in during the most crowded evenings of the week. It doesn't sound like a great strategy, really.'

Garreth raised his eyebrows. 'I thought I was the expert on thieving here?'

'Oh, I'm sorry! I didn't want to insult you – I...'

'Oh, please – Zovinar.' The first time he addressed her by name. Perhaps he should have used a title – but how could he call her Lady Zovinar at the sight of those wide blue eyes and mortified blushes? 'I was joking, I'm sorry – of course you're right. It's a ridiculous strategy.'

'It – is?'

'You just explained to me exactly why it was,' he said wryly. 'Why do you doubt your own conclusions?'

'I don't know.' She looked away. 'I say stupid things, sometimes.'

'You haven't said a single stupid thing to me for the entire evening.'

She abruptly turned back to him, her eyes narrowed, the blush on her face deepening. ‘You called me stupid. Out there.’

‘I – yes. Well.’ Out there. Where he had still believed her one of the usual self-absorbed Copper Coast girls, the type that would never be kind without a favour in return. ‘That wasn’t because of you. I had some trouble wrapping my head around the concept of you trying to help me.’

‘Which *was* a rather stupid idea,’ she said bitterly.

‘A kind idea, too.’

‘That doesn’t make it any less –’

‘Listen,’ he interrupted her, his voice too pressing. He shouldn’t care, he really shouldn’t – but damn it, was he supposed to nod along while she was convincing herself it was a *mistake* to be different from the rest of this bloody court? ‘Do you want to know why I’m stealing from all of you? Because I lived in this place once and it betrayed me. Because the people I considered my friends turned their backs on me the moment I was no longer an asset to them, because they betrayed people I loved like my brothers, and I’m a spiteful bastard who likes to see them get nervous a bit. That’s all there is to it. You’re not stupid. You’re better than anyone I met here, and I expected worse. Alright?’

She stared at him. Large blue eyes, as pale as her dress. Garreth sucked in a breath and turned away, his heartbeat pulsing in the veins at his temples.

‘You...’ She sounded dazed. ‘You’re stealing from us because you think we’re all...’

‘Liars and pretenders?’

‘Says the thief.’

He shook his head. ‘I’ve never told a woman I’m madly in love with her only to disappear as soon as her inheritance disappoints. I’ve never courted four people at once, or –’

‘We’re not *all* like that!’ Zovinar interrupted him, and he couldn’t say whether she sounded indignant or amused. ‘I mean, some are – but not *everyone*.’

‘I’ve met exactly one apparent exception so far.’

‘Oh, no, but you’re exaggerating.’ She could sound surprisingly firm. ‘Do you see the lady in the green gown over there, dancing with the red-haired man? They’ve been engaged since her first month here and she never...’

‘Easy when the loot is already secured, isn’t it?’

‘And Beyra – with the blond braids, near the stage – she has been promised to some duke from the Snake’s Spine since birth and she’s never looked at anyone else.’

‘Again, she doesn’t need to.’

Zovinar rolled her eyes at him, and he laughed out loud. The look suited her too well, in a light-hearted, unexpected way, another glimpse behind her well-mannered façade. The small grin lingering on her face didn’t look like her

governesses would approve, either.

‘Well, fine – Viviette, then? With the dark curls and the red dress, there. I’m sure *she* isn’t lying to any men. She scares them all off, so far.’

Garreth glanced at the frail figure in the corner, surrounded by three men who all looked rather constipated. Not the most frightening sight – but her name rang a bell.

‘She’s that princess from the mountains, isn’t she? Suppose her father will get someone to marry her eventually.’

‘But she doesn’t lie or pretend.’

‘And all of these girls would if they had to.’ He shrugged. ‘As long as you can get your hands on some husband, everything is allowed – isn’t that effectively what they teach you here?’

She didn’t answer. When he turned back to her, she was avoiding his gaze, biting her lower lip as if to swallow tears. Oh. Damn it. Here for a long time. Perhaps he should have kept his mouth shut about the hunt for husbands.

‘Eh, do you –’

‘Don’t look at me like that,’ she said tensely.

‘Like what?’

‘So commiserative. I *know* I’m pathetic without some thief giving me pitying glances.’

Some thief. The best he could have hoped for, and yet it stung. Garreth threw a look through the candle-lit room – nobody was keeping an eye on them in particular, at least – and said, ‘I don’t find you very pathetic.’

‘Four years.’ She about spat it into his face, in the politest, calmest way he had ever heard someone spit out words. ‘I’ve been here for *four* years, and still nobody can be bothered to ask for my hand – except for two men who proposed with such ridiculous conditions that my uncle refused them. So now I’m here, withering away as an old spinster and catching thieves. Don’t pretend you didn’t realise.’

Garreth opened his mouth, and found himself lost for words. *Four*? Hell’s sake, *she* shouldn’t need four years to find a decent man. Even the idiots who preferred their women deceitful and self-centred at least had to appreciate how beautiful she was – a pale, colourless beauty, but a damn pleasant sight nonetheless. But her uncle – the duke of Tanglewood, probably? – wouldn’t reject a candidate without reason either.

‘I can honestly say I didn’t realise,’ he said.

Zovinar pressed her lips. ‘Oh.’

‘Haven’t you considered leaving? Men outside Copper Coast tend to be more sensible.’

‘My uncle doesn’t want me to.’ Her shrug was an unconvincing attempt at indifference. ‘Still holding hope, apparently. Don’t know why, but – well.’

She looked so lost all of a sudden, her shoulders sagging under the silk of her gown, her eyes avoiding him. He wanted to lean over and hug her. Tell her it would be fine, even if he knew there was nothing he could do to help her – he would be out soon and never see her again. But she had saved his life in that garden, and listened to his rambling without calling him a madman, and now he could only stand here sheepish and silent?

‘Can you keep a secret?’ he said.

She abruptly looked up. ‘What?’

‘If you can keep a secret.’

‘You mean, except from the secret of your thieving ways and...’

‘Yes.’ He grimaced. ‘Apart from that.’

‘I think I can, Lord Thief. What is it?’

‘Garreth,’ he said.

She blinked. ‘What?’

‘Call me Garreth. It’s a little more flattering.’ He coughed. ‘But please don’t spread that name. It might kill me.’

‘Pretty reckless to tell me, then,’ she said, but she said it with a mischievous smile that would horrify her governesses. Garreth laughed again. Hell’s sake, it was far too enjoyable, watching her wrestling free from that stifling person the court wanted her to be, one smile at a time. Not that he should care, of course he didn’t care, but he damn well wanted to know what more he could bring to light.

‘I think you already noticed I’m not always equally sensible,’ he said. ‘How do you feel about dancing?’

Her blush deepened to a bright crimson. ‘*Dancing?*’

‘In pursuit of normality. Assuming that you’d like to, of course.’

‘I would, but...’ Her gaze ran over him again, leaving a pleasant tingle in its wake. ‘I didn’t know – do you even...’

‘I lived here,’ he said dryly. ‘It’s been some time, but I’m rather confident I won’t stumble over my own feet.’

She uttered a breathless laugh. ‘In that case – if you’re sure?’

Was he sure? He would draw more attention dancing than standing in some faraway corner of the room – but to hell with the good sense, he wanted to see her smile again, wanted to peel those overly civilised layers off her and figure out the depths beneath. If dancing took only a single heartbeat of formality away...

If he had to be senseless anyway, he might as well have a good evening for once.

The court did stare as they made their way towards the dancefloor, but Garreth suspected it might be because of Zovinar rather than because of his own mysterious identity. After four years few men would still bother to invite her for a dance. But floating along at his arm, she barely seemed to notice the glances, and she took her position between the other couples with not a trace of timidity in her eyes.

For that single quiet moment before the musicians began to play, she shone brighter than anything else in this entire damned hall. Brighter than the crystal chandeliers and the polished marble, brighter even than the silver leaves of her tiara against her dark hair – just that smile, that dazzling, genuine smile...

The music began to play, and reflexes took over.

Zovinar didn't shrink away from his touch as his fingers found her hand and waist. Half an hour ago, in the garden, it had been his fear driving his heartbeat to a dizzying pace when he had wrapped his hands around her wrists. Now something entirely different made his pulse quicken as his skin met hers – a feeling like a promise, a treasure waiting for discovery. Her softness was beyond enticing, inviting him to pull her closer and explore where the lines of her body might lead him. An impossible temptation, but enough to make him forget for a moment about even the danger of the eyes following him.

Perhaps he shouldn't have asked her to dance – or perhaps it was the best decision he had made all evening.

It had been six years since he had last practiced his passes, in the sun-drenched court gardens with the brothers and some cousins whose names he couldn't even remember – yet the dance still came to him as if it hadn't been more than a day. Zovinar found his rhythm effortlessly, moving so lightly that it seemed she was floating in his arms. The music carried them over the polished mahogany of the floor, steering their steps and turns until his world had shrunk to the lively melodies of the flutes, the minty scent of her perfume, her body brushing past his fingertips at every move. The elation in her eyes. His head, swimming as if he were drunk. She didn't even look like a Copper Coast girl anymore. None of the couth reserve left on her face, the polite distance she had been trained to maintain under all circumstances – just a blushing, beaming dancer in his arms, dark locks flowing over her shoulders with every turn...

Was it even a conscious decision? On a whim he moved the hand on her back as they turned, slid upwards over the smooth silk of her gown until his fingers found the bare skin between her shoulder blades. Zovinar gasped without sound, but her quick feet didn't falter as they turned again, and the air escaped her lungs in a breathless laugh that set his heart on fire. The wonder in her pale eyes, as if she was shocked at her own senses – hell, what else could he have made her feel if only these watching eyes hadn't been around?

And the music stopped.

Garreth was torn from the dreamlike world of their dance so abruptly that he nearly cursed. For hell's sake, what was he *thinking*? There was absolutely nothing he was supposed to make her feel – he wasn't supposed to feel a damn thing himself either. He was here in an attempt not to get hanged. And why in the world was everyone suddenly moving around him, backing away from the stage as if dancing itself was an offense?

‘Zovinar?’ he hissed.

‘The queen!’ She had stiffened up at his arm, slid back into her bashful attitude so convincingly that she looked like another woman entirely. ‘They already said she’d –’

‘The *queen*?’

‘And the prince – Garreth, are you...’

The blood drew from his face. Edelin. Roark. Oh, gods be damned. The two people in the world who’d recognise him without doubt. Why did they have to show up *tonight*?

‘I have to go.’

The words fell over his lips in a mindless whisper. Gone were the honest concern in her voice, her feathery touches, the ecstasy of the dance. A blind fear wiped them from his memory as if they had never even existed. The queen. The prince. Here.

‘Garreth?’

He was backing away already. People were looking at him, he knew, wondering where in hell he was going. Zovinar turned to follow him with her eyes. Her hand came up as if to stop in, then fell powerless to her side – no excuse to touch him, they both knew the rules, and yet he couldn’t suppress a sting of disappointment.

‘Where are you going?’ she mouthed.

What was he supposed to say? I’m sleeping in some run-down hostel across the river, in a neighbourhood that would make your governesses faint at the name alone? Behind him the trumpets blared, and another jolt of panic shot through him – he shouldn’t be saying anything at all. He should be running and thanking his lucky bones that Edelin and her bloody son hadn’t arrived at the ball in any more subtle fashion.

‘Sorry,’ he whispered, and fled.

CHAPTER 3

Zovinar jerked around, in a feverish attempt to follow his broad back through the crowd. Past the ladies and the noblemen and the governesses and even the knights – through the shadowy doorway farthest away from the queen and crown prince entering the room. Then he was gone, out of sight as if he had never burst into her night in the first place, with not a single last glance over his shoulder.

Sorry.

Nothing else.

Around her, the court grew back into existence as she became aware of the stealthy glances and whispers again – as if she woke up from some painfully clear daydream in which she had been someone else entirely, someone who wasn't stupid and tedious... She closed her eyes. The world spun around her – the queen's voice in the background, the warmth of the hall washing over her. Her body was tingling in a way she had never felt it tingle before. As if those brazen fingertips had touched far more than just her back, as if he had somehow reached into a secret part of her and stirred up an unfamiliar ache, a yearning for him to come back and steal another hand along her body –

What was she *thinking*?

A whiff of cool air reached her as the couples around her took up positions to continue their dances. It didn't clear her heated mind. The part of her that she knew, the part that was still the well-educated, rule-abiding Zovinar the spinster, was telling her that people were staring, that she had to move, that she had to take up some modest position at the walls and hope the world would soon forget about this odd sequence of events – but her body abandoned her. It barely felt like *her* body. As if he had pulled an entirely different person from below her own skin, a woman who danced with thieves and enjoyed it too, a woman who felt a man's touch and wanted...

She sucked in a shivering breath. No. Of course she didn't want such a thing at all. She wanted to be a decent lady. She wanted to follow the rules, survive at this court and find a husband. But that stolen, forbidden caress, those feather-light fingertips over her exposed skin...

‘Zovinar!’

Elena emerged out of nowhere, dragging her off the dancefloor with a mixture of obvious jealousy and so much excitement that even her small nose was trembling. ‘You must tell me *all* about Lord Griffith – good gods, he was *so* handsome! And those *shoulders*! I about *fainted* when I saw you with him!’

‘Oh. Yes.’ Somehow, with Elena’s clammy hands clasped around her upper arm, her sensible mind only continued losing ground. A thief, she reminded herself. An exile. But those shoulders, indeed. The laughter lines around his eyes, wrinkling at any word she spoke. His quick, slender hands – thieves’ hands, but the way he had held her as they danced... ‘I suppose he wasn’t ugly, no.’

‘Oh, you *never* appreciate the handsome ones, silly,’ Elena said, rolling her eyes. ‘But if you can’t find a kinder word for him than *not ugly*, you might as well leave him to me.’

A sour taste welled up in the back of her throat. Leave him to Elena. Leave him to anyone – as if he was hers now, as if she had any claim on him. As if she’d ever see him again.

‘Look...’ She averted her gaze. ‘I don’t even know if he’ll be back. He said – he’s very busy.’

‘And you didn’t even ask him to write you? You can be so *stupid*.’

Zovinar yanked her arm from the other girl’s hands, her heart suddenly pounding in every fibre of her body. Stupid. *Stupid*. But Garreth had said she wasn’t – and not pathetic either – and held her – and *touched* her.

And she was running, her limbs overruling every last trace of reason. Through that narrow doorway where he had disappeared mere minutes ago. Through the corridor behind, a straight line into the gardens. He couldn’t be far, people must have seen him, *someone* should be able to tell her where he had gone.

‘Zovinar!’

Elena’s voice behind her, shrill and confused. Zovinar didn’t stop. Through the darkness of the gardens, lit only by the occasional torch and lantern, over the paths leading to the main exit of the palace complex. Her breath was whistling through her throat, her heart pounding against her chest as if it were trying to break free – she was going mad, and what could she do about it? She *couldn’t* just let him walk out of reach. She had to know where she could find him, where she could see him again.

‘Zovinar!’

There was the spot where she had called out for him. Where he had held her – hands on vulnerable skin, and yet the memory seemed not nearly so frightening now, with the memory of his tender, determined fingertips still lingering on her back.

Something white lay in the grass, mere yards away from that spot.

A scrap of parchment.

She skidded to a halt, knees shaking from the sprint. Behind her, Elena's footsteps rapidly came closer. Others were following, too – other girls? Governesses? Knights? Zovinar knelt without looking back, snatched the parchment from the ground and shoved it into her sleeve, far away from the prying eyes. At the same moment something else caught a glimmer of torchlight in the corner of her eye, a flash so quick she believed for a moment she had imagined it.

But there, half-hidden in the grass, lay a small ruby pendant.

She reached for it, the breath catching in her throat. Had he thrown it away on his flight? Did the parchment come from the same pocket – was it truly *his*? Between the leaves of grass and the crumbly earth, the gem felt cold and smooth to her eager fingers. In this spot, the exact place where she had stopped him... It couldn't be a coincidence, could it?

'Zovinar!' Elena managed, breathlessly, as she finally caught up. 'Zovinar, you're giving me the jitters! What in the world are you –'

'I found something,' she interrupted, and Elena shut her mouth at once.

'Oh, *gods*! That's Thorva's pendant! Oh, my dear heart – how did it get *here*?'

'That,' a male voice said behind Zovinar, 'is an excellent question, Lady Elena.'

Elena paled abruptly, then blushed so deeply her head seemed about to explode. Zovinar barely dared to breathe. That voice – she knew that voice.

'Lady Zovinar?' The man sounded amused, but in a dangerous way, an undertone suggesting he would find it equally funny to see her thrown at his feet. 'I understood that you've been witness to some rather unusual events tonight?'

She turned around, slowly, the ruby pendant clenched in her fist. It took her frantic mind a moment too long to recognise the sinewy man who had shown up behind her, his thin lips curved in a mirthless smile, his black hair combed back over his head – Roark. Edelin's son. The crown prince. Garreth had paled at the mention of his name, somehow that memory was still clear as day in the fog of her thoughts – but why in the world had *he* followed her outside?

She swallowed. The edges of the ruby cut deep lines into her hand palm.

'Your – Your Highness.' Her curtsy came out stiff and shaky. 'Forgive me, I did not realise...'

'I noticed,' he said. His smile still didn't reach his eyes, which lay deep in his face, dark and cold like a starless sky. Behind him, more and more people were flocking towards the scene, in small, whispering groups. 'Could you show me what you found, Lady Zovinar?'

'A – a ruby, Your Highness.' She stuck out her trembling hand. 'Elena suggested it might be Lady Thorva's pendant. I – I suppose it was stolen.'

'Yes. Your governess told me the thief was caught tonight?'

'He escaped, Your Highness.' Her mouth was drying out under his unwavering stare. 'I – eh – another visitor caught him here – I think he threw away the ruby when he fled?'

‘Another visitor, yes, I heard so much. Lord... Griffith, wasn’t it?’

His scepticism at the name was thick like cream. Oh, good gods. Did he *know* Garreth? There would have been no reason to flee so abruptly if they had never met before – but had he seen anything, did he suspect anything?

‘Yes, Your Highness,’ she managed.

‘Who left us before my mother and I could thank him for his assistance.’

‘That – that seems so, Your Highness.’

‘Rather unusual, wouldn’t you say?’

Zovinar opened her mouth, her mind blank. What did he suspect? What did he *know*? Around them, the circle of onlookers grew larger, eyes piercing at her with razor-sharp curiosity. Sweat was trickling over her back. She couldn’t betray him, not after he had trusted her with his name – but how could she lie to a *prince*?

‘I – I don’t know, Your Highness.’

He raised his thin black eyebrows. ‘You don’t know?’

‘Why he left.’ Her voice was barely more than a hoarse whisper now. ‘He didn’t tell me where he was going.’

‘You did spend some time speaking with him, didn’t you?’

‘Yes, but...’

‘You didn’t ask him anything about his residence? His plans for the night? His friends and acquaintances?’

‘Not really – I...’

‘What *did* you speak about, Lady Zovinar?’

Honesty and stupidity. Not an answer she could give. ‘About my time in Copper Coast – I told him about Tanglewood – I think he mentioned – eh – some family...’

‘I have the impression,’ Roark said slowly, ‘that you’re not being entirely honest with me.’

Her lips refused to move. She stared at his face, cold and biting, his empty eyes returning the stare without a blink. Around them nobody moved. Please, she wanted to beg, say something, do something, save me from whatever he’s trying to make me say – but the man standing before her was a kingdom’s crown prince, the most powerful man at the court after his stepfather himself, and not even Crisanta moved in the shadows behind him.

‘Lady Zovinar?’ he said. Somehow it sounded like a warning, and Zovinar flinched. Cold, dead silence. He couldn’t – *hurt* her, could he?

‘I’m asking you *one* last time,’ he added, barely moving his thin lips, ‘and I –’

‘Oh, don’t be a jerk, Roark,’ a girl’s voice cut through the frozen stillness of the scene. ‘Stop frightening her, for hell’s sake. She doesn’t know what she doesn’t know.’

Abruptly the curse was broken; suddenly the onlookers were breathing again, at once the trees resumed their rustling. Roark stood frozen for a moment, then rolled

his eyes without even turning his head.

‘A good evening to you, too, Viviette.’

‘Don’t pretend you’re trying to throw a party here,’ the crown princess of the Peaks snapped, shoving two gasping ladies aside to step into the circle. Her eyes were shooting daggers. ‘What point are you trying to make? Just tell Zovinar what you suspect is going on, or stop bothering her and get back inside. You’re disappointing dozens of girls who saved their dances for you, in case that escaped your mind.’

‘Kind of you to remind me.’ He looked less than grateful. ‘You’ll forgive me for being a little suspicious of Lord Griffith, after –’

‘Yes, yes,’ she interrupted him, waving the rest of his sentence away. ‘Sure you are, but that doesn’t make Zovinar here a criminal, does it? So what’s your theory? Lord Griffith is a thief himself?’

Roark raised his eyebrows. ‘I haven’t heard anything disproving the idea, so far.’

‘Probably because you haven’t been asking the sensible questions yet,’ Viviette said, turning to Zovinar without waiting for an answer. ‘You found Lord Griffith fighting off the thief here in the garden, did I understand that correctly?’

Zovinar nodded. Her tongue seemed to have frozen.

‘Good,’ Viviette said, smiling a determined smile at her. ‘And you didn’t only see Lord Griffith himself? You saw the thief, too?’

‘Oh, yes.’ Somehow the princess’s smile looked like an instruction – a reassuring, affirmative instruction. Of course. This was all she needed to say, and strictly speaking, it was not even a lie. ‘Yes – I definitely saw the thief.’

‘Well.’ Viviette turned back to Roark, her smile hardening. ‘Then your theory must be incorrect, unless you believe Lord Griffith capable of being two men at the same time?’

Roark’s glare was cold as ice. ‘I don’t think there is reason to ascribe such capabilities to Lord Griffith, whoever he is. Thank you, Lady Zovinar.’

Zovinar managed a quick curtsy. When she looked up, Viviette had turned her back on the crown prince again.

‘Elena, I suggest you bring that ruby back to Thorva. And...’ She tilted her head, her green eyes examining Zovinar with uncanny sharpness. ‘Lady Crisanta, do you think I could leave with Zovinar? She might need a cup of hot tea and a good night of sleep after all this excitement.’

‘Oh, that is very kind of you to offer, Viviette,’ Crisanta said, slightly out of breath. ‘Are you sure you want to miss out on the rest of the ball?’

‘It’s only once. I’m sure Roark will be happy to cause some royal commotion in my place.’

‘With all pleasure,’ the prince said with a curt bow. He turned away and strode back inside without another word.

Viviette's room lay a single corridor away from Zovinar's own, in the elegant wing of the palace complex where the young ladies of Copper Coast had their residence. On the desk lay a solid pile of letters and an open lawbook; two muddy boots stood at the foot of the bed. Zovinar closed the door behind her with a feeling as if she was stepping into some strange dream. As if a charming thief and the eager stirrings of her own body weren't enough yet, now there was Viviette too, standing up for her after two years of polite distance and the occasional sardonic remark?

'Thank you,' she managed. It was the first time she spoke since leaving the ball. 'That was really very kind of...'

'Oh, please,' Viviette said, gesturing her to sit down. 'He was being a jerk, and obviously nobody in this insufferable place was going to call him out on it. I could hardly stand by and watch. Tea? Anything stronger? I think someone hid a bottle of honey mead in the common room last week.'

Zovinar blinked. 'That's not allowed.'

'I doubt Crisanta will burst in to smell your drinks,' Viviette said. 'But tea for you, then? I...'

'I could use the mead probably,' Zovinar blurted out, and the other girl's smile broadened.

'Excellent. Take a seat. I'm back in a minute.'

She disappeared, her light footsteps removing themselves in the corridor. Zovinar fell down on the edge of the bed, threw a glance around, then peeled the parchment from her sleeve – slightly clammy from the grass, but the ink hadn't smudged. It was a stamp card: ten circles, seven of them filled with stamps in the shape of mermaids' tails. They stirred some memory of years ago, but she couldn't remember for the life of her what it was.

Footsteps were already coming closer again. She jolted up and tried to stuff the parchment back into her sleeve, with fingers that were trembling all of a sudden – one failed attempt, a second failed attempt, damn these narrow sleeves, and –

'What do you have there?'

Viviette had appeared in the doorway, a bottle of honey-coloured liquor in one hand, two glasses in the other. Zovinar sat frozen, only the parchment still trembling in her hand. If Viviette found out she *had* lied – if Roark found out...

'Please don't look so frightened,' the princess added, nudging the door shut with her elbow. 'I won't give Roark an excuse to turn into a raging bastard again. I just thought I might be able to help.'

'Help?'

Viviette shrugged. 'Nothing makes me happier than a little mystery every once in a while. A vanishing lord is at least more interesting than stupid things like – I don't know, why Renwick is suddenly ignoring Elena.'

‘Why *is* he?’

‘Oh, I suspect it has something to do with Lord Everild arriving here two weeks ago,’ Viviette said, looking unhealthily content as she put down the glasses on her desk. ‘His family loaned Renwick’s father a fortune, a decade or so ago. Quite sure he has information about Renwick’s financial situation that might end up being painful if – well, you get the gist. Anyway. Need a hand?’

‘But...’ Zovinar sucked in a breath. ‘I thought you didn’t even like me?’

Viviette sounded amused rather than offended. ‘I don’t dislike you. I just hate this place with a passion, and usually you’re behaving like part of it.’ She pulled the cork from the bottle and poured two generous glasses. ‘But if you suddenly start breaking the rules, I’m more than happy to assist.’

‘I – well...’

I need to find a man I haven’t known for more than a few hours, she’d have to say, who threatened me in a deserted garden and stole from the king’s guests. A man who made me feel as if I’m hardly the person I’ve been for two decades, beautiful rather than boring, smart rather than senseless – a man whose touches I can still feel tingling on my back, who made me want things I’ve never even dared to *dream* about. That would sound ridiculous, wouldn’t it?

‘I don’t think he’ll be back,’ she said weakly. ‘Lord Griffith.’

‘Oh, no,’ Viviette said. ‘He’d be rather stupid to return.’

‘You – what?’

‘They would have caught him without you. I doubt he’ll take the risk a second time.’

Zovinar stared at her. Viviette handed her the glass of mead, with a pleasant, conversational smile, and raised her own to her lips. Only after taking a sip did she say, ‘But I take it you did like him?’

Zovinar opened her mouth, didn’t find a single sensible word to say, and couldn’t bring herself to close her mouth either. Viviette tilted her head, her green eyes uncomfortably interested.

‘I *do* assume you figured out that –’

‘How – how do you know?’

‘I saw him take away the ruby,’ she said dryly. ‘Expected the guards would drag him back in, then you did. Pleasant surprise. And you looked like you were amusing yourself, so I’m giving him the benefit of the doubt for now. Can hardly blame him for being a little annoyed about this place, after all.’

Zovinar uttered a baffled laugh. ‘And then you helped me with Roark?’

‘Roark has been a violent jerk for the decade I’ve known him, and he smells lies like a bloodhound. Whoever your Lord Griffith is, I doubt he deserves that much bloodlust after him.’ Another sip. ‘But you should go find him and ask him for the entire story, of course. So. What did you find?’

Zovinar handed her the unfolded stamp card and picked up her own glass. The mead was sharp and sweet, and warmed her with the first sip.

‘Stamp card of the ferry,’ Viviette said, with a single glance. ‘He must be sleeping on the other side of the river, then.’

‘Oh!’ She should have known; now she remembered the mermaids from their trip over the river, two years ago. ‘Good gods – but if he doesn’t have this card anymore, did he even get to the other side?’

‘The ferryman gives loans to regular customers,’ Viviette said immediately. ‘If he knows their address, at least. You may have an option there.’

Zovinar took another sip, followed by a deep breath. ‘Are you suggesting I ask the ferryman where to find him? Because I doubt the ladies will let me leave to...’

Viviette shrugged. ‘It’s pretty easy to sneak away through the windows.’

‘The *windows*?’

‘You’re on the first floor as well, aren’t you? The ivy can easily hold you. Just make sure to leave your window on a chink so you can get in again when you come back.’

‘But...’ Zovinar threw a glance at the closed curtains. Only one floor down – it didn’t even sound *that* mad. ‘Did you – do you ever...’

‘I prefer my morning walks without blathering dukes around,’ Viviette said dryly. ‘Sneaking out before sunrise works pretty well. Evening might be better for you, though. Easier to stay away a little longer.’

Zovinar stared at her glass, and then at the princess. Easier to stay away. At night. In the infamous neighbourhoods at the other side of the river. Madness – absolute, stupid madness – but then again...

That warm, tantalising hand on her back. Again she shivered.

‘Alright,’ she said, and took a generous sip to numb the nervousness. ‘I’ll go tomorrow night.’

CHAPTER 4

Garreth stumbled into his bedroom with a head pounding like a Temple bell. Cold, dusty air welcomed him, smelling of mould and rotting wood; when he sucked in a deep breath, the stench stuck to the inside of his lungs like marsh fumes. His bed was so hard that it seemed to kick back when he fell down onto the thin mattress. He couldn't be bothered to sit up and undress. As if he'd be able to sleep now even if he tried.

In the neighbouring room, a bed was squeaking in a desperate rhythm, all too audible in the silence. His neighbour screwing the newest fling, presumably. Garreth closed his eyes and tried to focus on something else than the rhythmic sound – anything else. The empty pockets of his trousers. Flatnose and his bill tomorrow morning. Edelin, in a palace where she didn't belong; Roark, with a title he didn't deserve. There should be enough to worry about, enough to keep his thoughts occupied and shut out the suggestive cadence creaking in the next room. But the sound clung to his mind, leading his thoughts in that one direction where they really shouldn't be going.

Zovinar.

The rosy blushes on her face, the amusement slowly unfolding in her pale blue eyes. Her body moving in perfect harmony with his. Her skin under his fingertips. That quiet gasp.

Would she have been so quiet if no-one else had been around?

Garreth groaned and sat up. This was ridiculous. He would never see her again, those cursed marble buildings would kill him if he ever returned – people would recognise him now, pay attention to him, and he had already escaped too narrowly tonight. He couldn't go back unless he was prepared to die, and if he died, who in the world would continue his search?

He wasn't going back. He couldn't go back. He'd have to earn his money in another way, and get his mind off some girl who had been nice to him for an hour, who had probably forgotten him by now...

He buried his face in his hands, with another muffled groan. That sounded barely convincing, if he was honest. He shouldn't have been so damned amiable – he should have remained distant, held onto the impression he was only speaking

with her to save his own hide and left at the first acceptable occasion. So what if he suspected there was far, far more to her than met the eye? It wasn't his to unearth anyway.

In the neighbouring room the couple was making less and less effort to be quiet; the unknown woman's breathless cries easily found their way through the thin walls, betraying the rhythm of her partner's pounding. Garreth clenched his jaws. *Don't* listen, he repeated to himself. Don't think of her, don't remember those soft hands, that quiet gasp. Don't imagine sneaking into her bedroom after that damned ball, don't wonder how ladylike she'd sound with your lips between her legs. But his body paid no heed to good sense and reason. His arousal was stirring in his trousers already, fuelled by his memories as much as the couple fucking in the next room. For the gods' sake, why was he working himself up over a girl who'd probably get the vapours at the thought of *kissing* a man? He knew the education she received in that place. Did he really believe she might simply utter that surprised laugh and happily succumb to him if he tore her dress off her?

Which was another image he really shouldn't have allowed to sneak into his thoughts.

With a groan of frustration he lurched to his feet and yanked his coat off his shoulders. He needed to sleep. He needed a meeting with Flatnose tomorrow morning, to talk the sense back into him and remind him he had more urgent things to worry about. He needed a beer in any place that wasn't Ulrick's castle, and perhaps a screw with any woman who didn't expect him to be charming or honourable. But the thought seemed boring to him now; what was the fun in a partner who was all she appeared to be at first glance, if you could also have...

Oh, damn it. He *couldn't* have her. He would never see her again, and he should be grateful that fate had spared him the embarrassment of any further acquaintance. She was gone. She was of no importance. He had to get his mind off her.

But his erection emerged full and hungry from his trousers, and when he wrapped his fingers around his own scorching flesh and jerked himself to release, it was with the memory of her soft hands still haunting his thoughts.

Flatnose found him along the canals of the city the next morning, before Garreth had even found a place to eat his breakfast in silence. The old mand materialised out of nowhere, his stocky shoulders buried under a fuzzy striped scarf he had probably knitted himself. His beady eyes stood even more uncomfortably knowing than usual.

'Morning, Lord Griffith.'

Garreth closed his eyes. 'Don't.'

'Had a bad night?'

Hardly had a night to speak of, Garreth wanted to say, and didn't. It was generally wiser not to give Flatnose even more information than he already had.

'Look,' he said, looking up and ignoring the question, 'we have a bit of a problem.'

'We?'

He bit away a curse. 'I.'

'Thought so.' Flatnose chuckled. 'What did you do? Steal from the queen herself?'

'Didn't steal anything at all. They fixed some security problems.'

Flatnose raised his plucky eyebrows. Garreth knew what that look was supposed to mean – since when do you pay attention to their attempts at security? A reasonable question. He knew the palace better than most knights, he could have found some unguarded way out if he had truly wanted to. It hadn't been strictly *necessary* to throw that ruby away. But he had passed the spot where Zovinar had found him, the spot where she had asked him if he was alright, and realised she would know what had happened as soon as the ruby's owner discovered it was missing.

It had seemed so reasonable to throw it away, in the spur of that moment. Now, in the clear light of day, the consequences were unpleasantly clear: he had lost his stamp card, seen himself forced to take a loan from the ferryman, and how would he pay Flatnose for their investigation now?

'Long story,' he said curtly. There was no sense in elaborating. Either Flatnose already knew, or he'd put the pieces of the puzzle together within a day or two.

'I see.' The old man scratched his nose. 'Is it a temporary issue? You're a loyal client, I might be unusually trustful and assume you can pay me next week.'

'It's going to be more than a week.'

'That's some impressive security,' Flatnose said dryly.

'It's not just that. They'll recognise me.'

'Ah. I see.'

They walked on in silence as they crossed the busy market square where any passer-by could pick up on their conversation. Only with the crowd behind him did Flatnose shrug and say, 'I'm sure you can find another place to rob.'

Garreth closed his eyes. He could, yes. He had been skilled enough at it to survive those first years of his banishment, when the money of others had been all that stood between him and starvation. But he wasn't in that place anymore, and he didn't want to be there either. The money of the court had been fine, the court had caused all misery in the first place – but stealing from innocent people?

'I could, I suppose,' he said, averting his eyes. 'But if you find him eventually, I don't think he'd be happy to hear we searched for him with the money of innocent civilians.'

Flatnose snorted. 'Suppose he'd be that kind of a weakling, yes.'

‘You’re still talking about my friend, in case you forgot.’

‘I never forget anything, Garreth.’ Flatnose grinned his blackened teeth bare at him. ‘But if he wanted to be found for free, he shouldn’t have hidden himself so well.’

‘Think he had his reasons,’ Garreth said grimly. ‘I’ll think about it. Will let you know. In case I end it here, what do I owe you?’

Flatnose shrugged. ‘I’ll be mild for the sake of our long history. Fifteen pieces of silver. This week, preferably.’

‘Will try.’

‘You’d better try your best, brother.’ Flatnose grinned again. ‘I’ll find you if you don’t.’

Garreth rubbed his eyes. ‘No need to remind me.’

‘Good. See you soon.’

And with that, the old man disappeared into the shadows again.

Gods be damned, *why* had he thrown that ruby away?

Garreth barely suppressed a curse as he stamped back to his hostel, still without breakfast. He wasn’t even sure if he could afford it. He barely had the money to pay for another week of meals and this room, he had to pay the ferryman back, and most of all, he had to find fifteen pieces of silver – better not to make Flatnose impatient, because the old bastard knew enough about him to kill him five times over.

So how was he going to find that money? No simple job would earn him two pieces of silver a day. He could take his meagre savings to the nearest gambling house and hope his good luck would follow him, but then again, his luck had hardly been a reliable companion during the past night... Try to find some moneylender who could help him out quickly? But those vultures would charge him double the sum in rent, and with the wages they paid anonymous workers with a blurry history here, he would spend the next two years paying his debt.

Did he have any legal choices left?

Perhaps Flatnose had been right, perhaps he was too much of a weakling for this life. Fifteen silver coins. He *could* help himself to the sum from strangers’ purses, if he wanted to. But just like he didn’t want to be that man harming young girls in gardens, he had never wanted to go back to the time of stealing from innocent souls –

Which left the option to steal from less innocent targets.

It took him an hour to come to terms with the idea. Then he bought breakfast anyway, because thinking on an empty stomach rarely found him any answers, and made a round through the neighbourhood. No shortage of dubious investors and double-crossing lawyers, at least. But most of them wouldn’t have more than a few

spare coins lying about – which meant he had no time to waste. One week left. A few coins every night. He might just make it if he used his time well.

And at the very damned least, the work would distract him from the persistent memories of last night, from the jumps his heart made with every dark-haired woman appearing around a corner.

But his mood darkened with the sky outside as he ate his cheap, tasteless meal in a nearby tavern, then retreated to the hostel's common room to sit out the hours until midnight. He had believed he was past this. He had believed he could be a slightly more honest man at this point in life. Even if his victims didn't deserve any better, at least he'd prefer to be better.

Two doors away, a sudden consternation arose in the hall. Garreth closed his eyes. Just what he needed on an evening like this, some drunkard or scorned lover storming in. But at least it sounded as if the innkeeper had the matter under control, and the confused shouts and sharp questions died away remarkably quickly.

'Griffith!'

Garreth jolted up. What in hell? Had Flatnose burst in to demand more money after all? The ferryman? He had given the man his address in return for the loan, admittedly, but why would he show up within a day?

'What?' he yelled back.

'Guest for you!' An unnerving undertone of surprise in the man's voice. 'She says...'

'*She?*'

Then he turned around and found Lady Zovinar of Tanglewood in the doorway, a dark blue cloak over her shoulders, and a timid apology in her pale blue eyes.

CHAPTER 5

‘What?’ Garreth said.

Zovinar nearly flinched. In this messy, stinking hostel, in simple linen trousers and a plain white shirt, he looked painfully different from the man who had danced with her last night – still beautiful, in that same boyish, charming way, and yet something stonelike had slipped over his face here, giving a hard edge to his expression. A hint of danger. A glimpse that told her, more sharply than the toothless beggars and the gaunt children outside, that she was an intruder in this world, a silly girl who should know better than to come dallying into a place she could never understand.

‘Evening?’ she whispered.

Under his bewildered stare, she felt as if she was shrinking, melting back into something far more ridiculous than even the girl she was at the court. *Breathe calmly and deeply*, Crisanta echoed in the back of her mind, *keep your shoulders straight – you’re a lady, remember it with every step*. But when she attempted to smile, the expression felt watery and ingenuine on her face.

‘What?’ he said again.

Under his shirt, his muscles had tensed up. As if he were preparing for a fight. A tingle crawled through her, like excitement but exactly the wrong kind of excitement – oh, good gods, what had she *thought*? That he would throw his arms around her at the sight of her and dance around his hostel room until sunrise?

‘I found your stamp card,’ she blurted out. ‘I thought you’d want it back.’

Garreth blinked. A slow blink, as if he wanted nothing more than to close his eyes for the next hour. Only now did she realise how ridiculous she sounded – a stamp card? She had climbed from a window and risked severe punitive measures to return a *stamp card*?

‘Sorry,’ she stammered. ‘I wasn’t sure – I thought – perhaps you’d need –’

‘How,’ he interrupted her, ‘how in the *world* did you get here?’

‘I...’

‘Wait.’ He jumped up and threw a look over her shoulder. Footsteps quickly shuffled off. With a muttered curse he grabbed a nearby lantern off the floor, nodded at the stairs and added, ‘After you.’

‘What?’

‘My room. Not going to keep you in this company – oh, piss off, Col.’ The last was snapped at a little man in the corner, who had pulled a suggestive face at the word *room*. ‘Second floor.’

Zovinar stumbled up the stairs, with shaking knees and a pounding heart. Stupid, her mind was echoing, stupid, stupid. He had been *acting* yesterday. She should have known after his transformation in the garden. Of course he was another man here – of course the man she had been looking for didn’t even *exist* anymore.

‘To the left,’ Garreth’s voice said behind her. Curt and strained. ‘Third door. It’s locked.’

She waited for him to let her in, then stood awkwardly in the middle of the room as he slammed the door behind him and turned to her. In the light of his single lantern, his face looked dark and ominous, as if he was again the man who had threatened her with his hands around her wrists.

‘I – I’m sorry.’ Her voice sounded creaky from her dry mouth. ‘If you’d rather have me leave –’

‘What,’ he interrupted her, closing his eyes again, ‘are you *doing* here?’

‘Here.’ She grabbed in her pocket, with trembling fingers, and found the smooth parchment of the stamp card only at her third attempt. ‘I took it for –’

‘Zovinar.’

She fell silent. What was it about the sound of her name on his lips, even now? As if he *knew* her, as if he was speaking to that part of her she barely understood herself.

‘Sorry,’ she whispered.

‘Stop apologising, for hell’s sake!’ His voice grew louder. ‘How did you *get* here, Zovinar? Your governesses are grounding you for the next two years if they...’

‘I – I climbed out.’

‘You *climbed out*?’

‘Through the window.’ She didn’t dare to look up. ‘Asked the ferryman if he knew you and he said – well, I paid off your debt and then he gave me your address.’

‘You *paid* him?’ He stepped away from the door with a joyless laugh and sank down on the edge of his bed. She could feel his gaze burning in the skin of her forehead. ‘Why in the world did you go through all that trouble just for a bloody stamp card?’

She opened her mouth, and didn’t find any sensible words to speak. Before her, on the bed, he abruptly leaned forward.

‘Zovinar, look at me.’

Lifting her head was a physical effort. Garreth was staring at her, his eyes narrowed, his hands clutched around the edge of his mattress. She felt like a child,

small and stupid – no miracle that her uncle didn't even trust her to find a man on her own.

'You're not scared of me, are you?'

His voice sounded softer all of a sudden, nearly cautious. She shook her head. Words still failed her. Around them the dark room seemed frozen except for the shadows of the flame dancing over his body, deepening the folds of his clothes, the contours of his muscles – not a sound to be heard except for a muffled fit of laughter coming from downstairs. Garreth averted his face, taking a deep breath.

'I didn't expect you.'

'I'm so sorry – I should have –'

'Stop apologising – I don't *mind* seeing you!'

'You – you don't?'

'What? Of course I don't!' He turned back to her, with a bewildered laugh. 'I'm trying to figure out into how much trouble I've landed you and how in the world I'm going to keep you safe from the wrath of the court if they figure out where you –'

'You – you didn't land me into anything,' she stammered. 'You didn't *ask* me to follow you.'

'I should never have – last night...'

Again a brittle silence rose between them. He didn't seem to know where to look, or where to leave his hands; his arms and shoulders tensed up under the thin linen of his shirt. Those strong arms that had held her so confidently – his slender fingers, the fingers that had awoken all these strange feelings itching inside of her.

'I was happy you were there,' she said, her voice too small.

'You – were?'

'Weren't you?'

He closed his eyes. 'Oh, gods' sake. Do you want me to be honest?'

'Are *you* asking...' She managed a laugh. '*You're* the one making a point of honesty here, I –'

'I wasn't behaving how I should have, alright?' he interrupted her, with a sudden, nearly violent gesture. 'I should have kept my distance, I shouldn't have pulled you into this mess – but you were too fascinating and I was too weak, and for hell's sake, you really should know better than to be around a man like me, alright?'

'What – why...'

'Listen.' He jumped up and paced through the room as if he hadn't even heard her, his voice spilling over his lips like water breaking through a dam. 'I'm not that honourable nobleman I pretend to be, do you understand? I – you – the way we danced last night...' He sucked in a breath. 'It did things to me. Made me feel things I shouldn't be feeling, made me want things I shouldn't be wanting. I was stringing you along into my own – my own...'

He stood still, slightly out of breath. Now, finally, their gazes met. A plea for understanding was gleaming in his eyes, a plea for forgiveness, almost.

She could feel his fingers against her skin again at that look. The shivering warmth running through her. The captivating movements of their dance, her body melting against his hands wherever he touched her – all these feelings she had only heard the other girls whisper about.

‘Your own – what?’

He didn’t look away from her, barely even blinked. In the flickering candlelight, his eyes looked like bottomless pools; his fists hung clenched along his sides. Something cramped up inside her at the sight of him, tall and broad-shouldered – even from five feet away she imagined she could feel the warmth of his body again, that reassuring, tantalising warmth that had enveloped her as they danced.

‘Zovinar...’ His voice sounded hoarse. ‘Why did you come here?’

‘I wanted to see you again.’ She barely breathed the words, and even then they sounded too loud in the silence of the room, forbidden thoughts that should never even cross her mind. ‘I wanted to dance with you again. I...’

I wanted to feel your hands on my skin again, wanted you to turn me inside out again, wanted you to make me whoever you made me last night again. The words didn’t reach her lips, and yet his eyes softened as if he could read them in the lines of her face.

‘Come here,’ he said quietly.

Her breath caught in her throat. Five feet between them. Two steps. He stood like a wall, unmovable, his smile something between a warning and an invitation – *come here*. He wouldn’t touch her of his own accord. But if she stepped forward – if she reached out and found the hard lines of his body under her fingertips –

Where would he stop?

Did she even care?

Her body was warming under his look, a feeling as if a blush was rising on every inch of her skin. She couldn’t. She shouldn’t. The rules didn’t allow her to. But the faint smile playing around his lips, the memory of those slender hands against her back...

She took a single step forward, then hesitated. Garreth didn’t move. Close enough, now, to distinguish the stubbles of his short beard, the lighter flecks of grey in his dark eyes. Close enough, she imagined, to hear his heartbeat like she heard her own, drumming in her ears as if to drown out the nervousness – one step and he would touch her. One step and she could reach those rugged shoulders, and not a governess in the world could dictate where her hands might wander – what did he feel like under that white linen? Velvety soft, firm like leather, silky and smooth?

Come here.

Her feet moved themselves, daring what her mind didn't dare to do. The void between them shrunk to a few inches as she stepped forward, unable to look away from his face – the gleam in his eyes, the smile tugging at the corners of his lips.

‘Very well,’ he muttered.

Then his arms were around her, swaying her off her feet and drawing her along into the rhythm of a melody only he could hear. Her body adjusted in an instance, found his balance, read his steps as if they had been written onto her heart itself – and then they were dancing, whirling and twisting through the small hostel room, the floor creaking under their feet, their breath coming out in ragged heaves of laughter. He held her close, far closer than the eyes at court would ever have allowed him to, pressing her against his muscular body as if she belonged to him. Faster and faster their feet came down on the creaking wood, their shared heartbeat accelerating as they swept and swirled and swooshed through the near-darkness – until finally their feet collided in their dizzying speed and Zovinar stumbled, breaking through the rhythm of their steps with a breathless cry. He caught her with a lightning-quick reflex, and pulled her back into his arms as he spun to a standstill. Now he was laughing, a full, unrestrained laugh that shook through his body as he pressed her against him – ‘Zovinar...’

She clung to his chest, light-headed and out of breath. Don't touch him, the rules told her, step back – but Garreth curled his fingers around her chin and forced her to look up, to meet his gaze, his eyes mere inches away.

Around her, the room stopped spinning.

The world shrunk from existence. The shouting and laughing downstairs died away, the memories of home evaporated; only his body remained, and her senses soaking him in. His fingers under her chin. His hand in the small of her back, pinning her against him. His scent, a woody, earthy fragrance of pinewood and smoke, and his face, far too close – the smile still lingering around his firm lips, the mess of his blond curls, the question in his eyes.

Zovinar parted her lips, as if to answer. No sound came out.

His fingers trailed along her jaw, tenderly tucked a lock of hair behind her ear and slid around her neck until his hand lay around the base of her head. His touches sent tingling shivers down her spine, dissolving into that deep, nameless hunger that stirred inside her. Again there was that look in his eyes, piercing through her as if to uncover something that lay miles deep under her skin –

‘Forgive me,’ he muttered.

And kissed her.

His kiss was soft and cautious, like an introduction, an invitation, an instigation – a forbidden, unforgivable touch that blurred all sensible thoughts and rules and warnings and left her aware only of his soft lips on hers. Her body awoke at once, in a single, aching stir. As if it had never planned to do anything else, as if it had only waited for his permission – a fire roaring from the deepest core of her into

every inch of her skin... She clawed her fingers into his shoulders and came up on her toes as their lips found a dance of their own, a dance that tasted of salt and a whiff of bittersweet alcohol, and made her feel drunk and dazed and so utterly triumphant she could have choked on it. His arms moved around her waist and lifted her. In a response of hungry instinct, she knotted her right hand in his blond hair and drew him even closer. Under her lips he uttered a soft moan that she could feel writhing in her loins, fanning the fire that burned through her...

He broke the kiss, abruptly. Zovinar gulped for breath, half-laughing, half-panting. Her heart was fluttering in her chest like a caged bird.

‘You madwoman.’ His voice was a hoarse whisper, shimmering with restraint, as if it took all his self-possession not to delve into her again. ‘You – oh, Zovinar...’

She moved up to kiss him again. In a single, fluent movement Garreth turned away, swayed her around, and pressed her back against the wall with the weight of his body. His forehead against hers. His glistening lips just out of reach, his hands on her hips as if to mark her with his fingertips. She wanted those hands on her, wanted them to explore her yearning body like she had never thought she could want anything.

‘You should know better,’ he managed. ‘You shouldn’t...’

Zovinar uttered a breathless laugh. ‘Do you want me to stop?’

‘No.’ It fell over his lips like a curse. ‘But I’m some dishonourable bastard who steals whatever he wants, and you –’

‘Liar.’ Burning, dangerous triumph was pulsing through her veins. He wanted her. He *wanted* her. ‘You’re only stealing out of spite. Is your conscience acting up now because you don’t hate me?’

A small grin grew around his lips. ‘How in the world did anyone ever convince you that you were stupid?’

‘How did anyone ever convince you that you’re a dishonourable bastard?’

‘Zovinar...’ He closed his eyes. ‘You’d be convinced too if you knew even half of what I want to do with you right now.’

Her heartbeat quickened, pulsing a blurry heat through her veins. Nothing fitted in her thoughts except for his body pressing against her breasts, her stomach, her hips – four years of waiting had broken free within her, lured out by the taste of his lips. Whatever he wanted...

‘Why don’t you try to convince me, then?’ she muttered.

‘Stop being so damned alluring – you should know better.’ His voice was a pressing whisper now. ‘You barely know me. You –’

‘You seem to know me better than anyone else.’ Her hands found his back again, the ridges of his shoulder muscles tense under her fingertips. Should she know better? But what had four years of knowing better ever done for her? ‘You knew this existed in me when I didn’t even know myself. You dragged it out of me.’

Are you scared of it now?’

‘I’m frightened of what you’ll think of yourself when you wake up tomorrow morning.’

‘And you think I’ll feel better if you send me home now?’

He managed a choked laugh. ‘Oh, for hell’s sake – do you have any idea how beautiful you are when you know what you want, Zovinar?’

She leaned forward and planted her lips on his.

There was nothing careful about his kiss this time, nothing cautious or tender; he answered to her challenge as if it was the last thing he’d do on earth, pinning her against the wall, driving the breath from her lungs. Under his eager hands and demanding lips her body became a vessel of dangerous desire, driven by a need far stronger than muscles and bones – she knew what she wanted, yes, recognised it in the promise of his kisses, and yet the shameless, primal thirst that unfolded within her defied all attempts to catch it in words. Him. Her. Sin. Surrender. His fingers found the lacing of her dress, and untied the ribbons with quick, clever movements. Then his hands lay against her back again, running along her spine with delicate insistence –

She drew back with a gasp. Garreth lowered his face in the hollow of her neck and chuckled as her breath caught again.

‘I’ve been wondering how you would sound without anyone around to hear.’

‘You...’

‘I warned you,’ he muttered, pulling her against him. ‘Don’t expect too much honour from me.’

The feverous bulge of his arousal pressed against her stomach, far more sizeable than even the well-thumbed romances making the rounds in the ladies’ wing had led her to expect. Zovinar stiffened up for the shortest moment, and immediately his lips froze against the vulnerable skin of her neck.

‘Sorry,’ she breathed. ‘I – I’ve never...’

‘Didn’t I tell you to stop apologising?’ He moved a fraction away from her, lifting his head to meet her gaze. Oh, gods, the fire smouldering in his grey eyes... ‘I’d rather chew off my fingers than touch you when you don’t want me to. Tell me if you want me to stop.’

‘I don’t. It’s just...’ She sucked in a breath. Her body was a tightened bowstring, wound up to explode in ways she could barely imagine. ‘So new, so...’

He moved only a single hand now, his fingers trailing along the silk of her bodice. ‘Have you never felt it at all?’

‘Felt what –’

‘Your body reaching that – peak?’

She barely dared to breathe as his hand found her hips. ‘No.’

A smile was playing around the corners of his lips, admiration mingling with wicked temptation. ‘Do you want me to go on?’

Oh, gods. The pressure of his fingers in her side. The warmth swirling through her body, the unbearable tension itching in some strange, unspeakable core of her. The rules, she tried to tell herself, she couldn't possibly allow him to continue – but her governesses didn't know she was here, and if they'd never know, why would she still allow their rules to override that burning, all-consuming ache of her body?

'Please go on,' she whispered.

He slowly sank through his knees. 'With all pleasure, then...'

Zovinar closed her eyes as his hands slid further down along her thighs, the sensation of his touch spreading through her like water ripples. Perhaps she was dreaming. Could anything real ever feel so blissfully tender, so breathtakingly tantalising? His fingers seemed to touch more than just silk and skin, as if he was calling onto some secret layer of pleasure just below the surface of her body, made of pure need and burning recklessness. His hands slipped under her skirts, and feathery fingertips found the inside of her thighs.

A quiet yelp fell over her lips. He held still again, looked up.

'Still want me to go on?'

She managed a choked laugh. 'Please.'

He hitched up her skirts, with quick, easy movements, his slender hands climbing higher and higher along her thighs, waking every inch of skin they passed. Not in her wildest dreams had she imagined exposing herself this way – or feeling so utterly, shamelessly invulnerable under his look. A thief. An exile. But rules and common sense lost all meaning under his rosy touches...

Warm breath stroked over the sweaty skin of her thighs, then found the place where her legs met. Softly, tenderly, he pressed his lips against her secret flesh.

'Garreth...'

His name dissolved into a quiet, wordless moan. The first flick of his tongue sent lightning bolts through her, reaching into her toes and the tips of her fingers, tightening every muscle in her body at once in a first shudder of pleasure. He gently delved deeper, exploring her, uncovering the brewing wetness that waited for him between her legs. Zovinar knotted her fingers into his curls and let her head roll back against the wall, unable to focus on anything but the agonising pleasure of his tongue and fingers disclosing the secrets of her body – a patient investigation, circling around that most sensitive place where her lips met, tickling and nuzzling... Her knees trembled. Her hands clenched into fists. An unbearable tension rose in her, curling her toes, catching her breath, until abruptly, with a surge of bright white relief, the pressure broke and she disintegrated, sinking through her knees as if her bones had melted in the heat of the explosion.

Then Garreth's arms were around her, cradling her like a baby against his chest as the waves of her release ran through her. She buried her face into his shirt and clawed her hands into his sides until the shivering subsided and the world slowly seeped back into her mind. His lips found the crown of her head, then her forehead.

He smelled sweet and salty at the same time, a smell that was both new and as familiar as her own skin.

‘Garreth...’ she whispered, and even the shape of his name on her lips felt new, different, as if it was the only thing left to say in the world. He chuckled softly, combing his fingers through her hair.

‘Take this as a compliment, not as a request – but you have no idea how much I want to lay you on that bed and take all of you right now, Zovinar.’

Her breath caught in her throat, with an alarming, eager tingle. Please do, she wanted to say, please show me all of this, all of you, because how can I possibly dislike anything you'll ever do? But she remembered young lady Melia, who had been hushed out of Copper Coast in shameful silence two years ago when her belly began to show, and the memory alone was enough to remind her of Crisanta, of Uncle Rusuvan's furious tirades.

‘I – I don't think I can...’

‘It wasn't a request. I wouldn't do it even if you wanted me to.’ Another soft kiss against her forehead. ‘I'm still that thief you've barely known for a day, and also, it's a bloody uncomfortable bed. You can get better.’

Better than this? Unimaginable – but he wasn't wrong, she barely knew him. It didn't matter how safe she felt in his arms, how many rules she had broken for him. She still had no idea why he had lived at Ulrick's court, what had happened to him, what he was doing now – surely the full profits from his thievery could pay for more than this small hostel room? Even if he had made her feel ten times this bliss, he would still have been a stranger.

She raised her head to look him in the eyes. A faint smile lingered around his lips, admiration with a hint of melancholy, as if he wished he hadn't been so reasonable himself.

‘But...’

He waited, his head slightly tilted. Zovinar hesitated. Perhaps she was being stupid. Perhaps he would laugh and call her ridiculous. Then again, it seemed strangely unlikely that he would.

‘Can I come see you again?’ she blurted out.

‘Oh, good gods.’ He ran a hand through his blond curls, his other arm still firmly around her. ‘I mean – yes, from an egoistic point of view, please do – but you'll have to take some risks you might not want to take, and I'm not sure why you would.’

‘I like talking with you.’ She sat up and blushed. ‘And a few other things too, perhaps.’

He burst out laughing. ‘Hell be damned, Zovinar, I wasn't planning on *this* much madness when I asked you to dance with me.’

‘Do you mind?’

‘Not particularly,’ he said dryly. ‘I might forgive you if you just kiss me once more.’

Her heart skipped a beat. ‘Once?’

‘Or twice, perhaps...’

And their lips found each other again, melting together until her own desire was all she still tasted.

CHAPTER 6

Even breakfast couldn't erase the taste of her body from his lips. It had etched itself in his memory with the silken softness of her skin under his fingers and the crack in her voice when she had moaned his name; sitting on the doorsteps of his hostel, Garreth couldn't help glancing in the direction of the palace every other minute, and felt disappointed every time he didn't find her blue cloak in the passing crowd. Madness, of course. She wouldn't run away from her breakfast to join him here, mere hours after he had walked her back to the ferry – if she was anything near reasonable, she wouldn't return at all. Then again, she had sounded alarmingly determined when she had kissed him at the waterside and promised to be back soon.

He took another bite of old bread and bland cheese and suppressed a groan. She shouldn't have cared to look for him in the first place. She shouldn't have followed him to his room. She shouldn't have walked up to him, shouldn't have danced with him, shouldn't have answered his kiss. She knew him for what he was – a criminal, an exile, nowhere near the kind of honourable lord she was supposed to wish for – and yet she had done all those things?

Probably, he told himself as he had told himself in the hours he had laid awake in bed, it had nothing to do with him at all. Four years in Copper Coast – obviously she was looking for a way out, *any* way out. He had been a safe option, she knew he couldn't betray her to her governesses, and then perhaps his blurry background wasn't that much of an issue anymore. He should just be wise and realise her interest didn't signal – well, anything more. He was an escape. That was all. Which was perfectly fine – better than the alternative, at least.

So why did the thought still sting?

The smack of a well-aimed pebble against his shoulder shook him from his thoughts, painfully abrupt. When he jolted around, he found Flatnose in the nearest alley behind him, gesturing him in no uncertain terms to follow.

Garreth muttered a curse and got to his feet, his half-finished breakfast in his hands. With his purse still glaringly empty, this was probably not the moment to object.

‘Can’t pay you yet,’ he said as soon as he had caught up with the old man. ‘But don’t worry, I’ll –’

‘Wasn’t going to talk about payment.’ Flatnose grinned at him. His sharp smell of old sweat and yellowing teeth killed the last of Garreth’s appetite. ‘Wanted to suggest a little deal to you. Three silver off the price in return for some information.’

Three pieces. A fifth of the price. By that rate he wouldn’t even have a debt left in a week.

‘What do you need?’

‘What was the duchess of Tanglewood doing in your hostel last night?’

Garreth nearly dropped his bread. ‘The – who?’

‘The duchess of Tanglewood,’ Flatnose repeated, his gruff voice a tad more curious now. ‘Lady Zovinar. I suppose you know her name?’

‘Wait, wait – *what?*’ He stood still and sucked in, in a decidedly unsuccessful attempt to look composed. The *duchess* of Tanglewood? *Zovinar*? The girl who had stormed back into his life last night to hand him a stamp card, kissed him as if she had forgotten he was still the same thieving exile, climaxed under his lips –

A shiver ran through him. The *duchess*?

‘I was under the impression...’ He closed his eyes for a moment. For hell’s sake, he had to restrain himself. Flatnose wasn’t blind. ‘From the way she spoke about him I assumed her uncle was Tanglewood’s duke?’

Flatnose snorted. ‘He’d like to be.’

‘He...’ Garreth shook his head. Duchess of Tanglewood. With a little less self-restraint he might have taken a duchess’s virginity on a ratty straw mattress. Gods be damned. ‘Alright. Mind elaborating?’

‘Well, mind...’ Another snort. ‘For the sake of our old friendship, then. Suppose most people already know, anyway. Started when the girl lost her parents when she was a toddler. Some fire, very tragic, you know how it goes.’

Garreth gestured at him with his half-eaten bun. ‘Go on.’

‘Uncle became her guardian. By Redwood law she’d become independent at seventeen.’

‘But he sent her to Ulrick’s court...’

‘At sixteen,’ Flatnose finished his sentence, with a gruff laugh.

‘That’s – why in the world didn’t people object if he shoved her out of the way so transparently?’

‘You’ve met her.’ The old man sent him a sideways glance, his beady eyes gleaming with obvious interest. ‘How dense would you say she is?’

A bolt of anger shook through him. Dense. Her soft voice – *is your conscience playing up because you don’t hate me?*

‘If she’s anything near dense, I’m the bloody king of Copper Coast.’

Flatnose raised his bushy eyebrows. ‘Not quite in line with her reputation.’

‘I know nothing about her reputation.’ His pulse was speeding up. ‘Where does it come from?’

‘Uncle Rusuvan, presumably.’

‘Oh, for hell’s sake – he’s been telling people...’

‘She’s a silly little lass who shouldn’t be left alone with a duchy for longer than a minute? Looks like it.’

‘But she’s still been the duchess of Tanglewood since she was seventeen.’

‘Oh, yes.’

‘But then...’ Garreth averted his eyes, blinking to get his reeling mind under control. ‘Look, I’m not an expert on Redwood laws, but then he doesn’t have any authority over her, does he? Why would she speak about him as if he won’t *allow* her to go wherever she wants to go or...’

Flatnose gave him another sharp stare, and Garreth swallowed the rest of his sentence. He had to remember who he was talking to – anything he said today might as well be sold to the highest bidder tomorrow, and he really didn’t need the world to know how unhappy she was at Ulrick’s court.

‘She can’t leave Copper Coast without his permission,’ Flatnose said when he didn’t continue.

‘Why?’

‘The contract with Ulrick’s people runs for indeterminate time. She needs her own signet ring to sign any document ending that contract, and she doesn’t have access to it.’

‘To her *ring*?’

‘Is currently lying in the vault of the lawyers at Willow Avenue. On Rusuvan’s orders.’

‘He took...’ Garreth bit out a joyless laugh, tasting the metallic taste of his anger in the back of his throat. ‘Hell’s sake. Isn’t it illegal to keep her away from her own seal?’

‘Oh, definitely,’ Flatnose said, with an ominous undertone in his voice. ‘But it’s not technically illegal for a girl to put her own signet ring into some vault and assign her uncle the sole right to open that vault again.’

‘Why in hell would she...’

His sentence died away. A silly little lass who shouldn’t be left alone with a duchy. The sudden tears in her eyes when he had called her stupid in that cursed garden, the flatness in her voice – *sorry, stupid question*.

‘She believed it herself,’ he finished his own question, his voice too sharp. ‘That she couldn’t be trusted with the thing. He made her believe...’

Flatnose didn’t answer, but his scowl spoke volumes. Garreth closed his eyes and muttered a curse – the duchess of Tanglewood. Did she even realise it herself, that her uncle had sent her away so he could play for duke in the castle that belonged to *her*? That he was actively keeping her away from home, actively...

Another realisation hit his mind, with so much force that he nearly cursed again.

‘Her marriage candidates.’ What had she said? That they wouldn’t agree to her uncle’s conditions? ‘Is he refusing them...’

‘Because he doesn’t want her to come home, and definitely not with a fellow who’d call him out on his crap?’ Flatnose gave a grim chuckle. ‘At least I’ve never heard any substantial arguments against any of the – seven of them, I think?’

‘*Seven.*’ A nonsensical twinge of envy hit him in the chest. Seven men refused for no decent reason – no miracle the others had stopped trying. ‘And she has no idea?’

‘If you say so.’

‘The bastard.’ His fists were itching all of a sudden, as if he could jump onto some horse and make straight for Tanglewood, punch the damned fellow into a couple of walls and throw him out into a ditch to finish the exercise – not his business, not at all, but he couldn’t shake off that pale shadow on her face, the near-crack in her voice when she had told him about her lack of suitors.

‘So,’ Flatnose interrupted his thoughts, casual as if they were meeting for a glass of beer and a chat about work. ‘Anything to say about the lady’s visit of last night?’

Last night. Her soft body under his hands and lips. No, he wanted to say, I have nothing to tell apart from what I told you already – but Flatnose would understand the message between the lines, hear the confession of activities that couldn’t bear the light of day, and somewhere, someone would probably be willing to pay for that information.

‘She figured out I was stealing jewellery at court,’ he said, curtly.

‘And nobody tied a noose around your neck yet?’

‘Looks like she didn’t tell them.’

‘Unexpected,’ Flatnose said dryly, and Garreth grimaced, recalling his own bewilderment in that garden.

‘Quite.’

‘And instead of snitching on you she came running into your hostel around midnight?’

‘She found the stamp card I lost. And...’ He hesitated. Well, fine, then. Better to employ a little lie, even if lying to Flatnose was generally a dangerous activity. ‘She wanted to know if she could get her friends’ stuff back. Had to tell her I already sold all of it, took a little time to make that point convincingly enough.’

‘And yet – no noose?’

‘Must be my innocent blue eyes,’ Garreth said, and Flatnose chuckled.

‘Wouldn’t dare to insult the young lady’s taste by suggesting anything else.’

He managed a faint grin. Next to him the old man stood still, pulled his fuzzy scarf straight and added, ‘Twelve pieces of silver, then. Six nights.’

‘Got it. Thanks.’

Flatnose vanished without an answer, as abruptly as he had shown up. Garreth sank down on the nearest pavement, took five deep breaths to calm his thoughts, and didn’t manage very well – gods be damned. Duchess Zovinar of Tanglewood. Locked into spinsterhood by an uncle who enjoyed his castle a little too much.

What was he involving himself in?

Not his business, he repeated to himself. He had enough to deal with already. Rusuvan was miles away, and what would it win him to get involved in this mess as well? But the harder he tried to make himself believe it, the harder he failed – because she had still saved his life, and asked him if he was fine, and climbed from a window to find him, and kissed him as if he was an honest man.

Sometimes the heart gets in the brain’s way, her governess had said. Good gods. She was a *duchess*. There was no sense in pursuing her. And yet – was he really considering staying silent because he couldn’t have her in return?

With a joyless laugh he picked up his breakfast and got to his feet. The lovely Copper Coast mentality. Nothing for nothing. *He* should know better, of all people. He’d have to tell her. Not because he wanted her gratefulness, or her body, or anything else, but because he liked her several tads more than he should, and wasn’t this what you did for friends?

Friends. The memory of her kiss ran through him again. What if it hadn’t only been the satisfaction of escaping the court that had driven her, what if...

A duchess. He interrupted his own thoughts so abruptly that it nearly hurt. She was a duchess, spinster or not, and he was still an exiled thief. Time to stop daydreaming. But he would tell her – next time he saw her, he’d tell her. In the meantime...

Twelve pieces of silver.

It really was about time he got back to work.

CHAPTER 7

Zovinar stared at the ceiling, and felt like laughing with every breath she took.

The hem of tonight's dress was muddy. She'd have to deal with that. The ivy branches had left red welts on her hand palms and wrists – better to wear gloves for the rest of the day. She hadn't slept for more than three hours. Someone would probably notice the bags under her eyes and start nagging about that, too.

But her body felt feathery light, as if this night had loosened muscles she hadn't even known to exist.

On the corridor girls' voices were bickering as usual – 'Alis! Alis, where's my bonnet? Oh, why do you *never* return what you borrow?' – 'Who took away that bottle of mead! If it was anyone who didn't pay for it – no, Thorva, don't you *dare* tell Crisanta about it!'

A grin was growing on her lips. It had all seemed so ridiculously important, two nights ago, their opinions and griefs and complaints. Was it just the thrill of slipping out that made her feel like she was barely even part of it anymore? Perhaps Viviette's morning walks were the reason she never minced her words.

Then again, perhaps the princess was just more stubborn than the average Copper Coast girl.

But why in the world couldn't she be stubborn too? If she wasn't so stupid after all, if she could perfectly well decide what rules weren't worth following – what people weren't worth pleasing – what balls weren't worth attending... What could they do about it? Tell Uncle Rusuvan, perhaps, but even the prospect of his cold letters didn't seem nearly so threatening all of a sudden.

Someone knocked on her door.

Zovinar jumped from her bed, grabbing for her gloves. Any of the girls, complaining about bottles and bonnets? But it had suddenly become very silent in the corridor outside.

'Yes?' she yelled, wrestling her fingers into the gloves.

The door opened immediately, revealing a tall figure in black velvet on her doorstep. Sleek dark hair, pale face, thin lips curled in something attempting to look like a smile –

Roark.

Roark?

Zovinar stared at him, all joy washed from her thoughts at once. The crown prince gave her a nod that looked little like a greeting, and more like a sign of impatience.

‘Lady Zovinar.’

‘Your – Your Highness.’ She had to force out the words. His eyes looked no warmer than two evenings ago, in that nightly garden where he had tried to pry the truth of Garreth’s identity from her; he had left her alone after Viviette’s intervention, but Viviette was nowhere around now.

‘You don’t mind if I come in for a chat, do you?’ he said, stepping in.

Zovinar shrunk back, bumped against her bed and sank down on the edge of the mattress with shaking knees. A chat. What had she *done*? He couldn’t hurt her, she tried to reassure herself, she hadn’t done anything wrong as far as the court knew – but those empty eyes... Did he know where she had been last night? Had anyone *seen* her?

‘Please take a chair,’ she stammered. ‘Eh – is there anything I can...’

‘I had a few questions about Garreth,’ Roark said.

She froze.

Garreth.

Don’t spread that name, he had said. *It may kill me*. Oh, good gods. Had she done anything – betrayed anything? Was he bluffing? Was it merely a guess that he hoped she would stupidly confirm?

He smells lies like a bloodhound, Viviette had said – but better to lie than to betray him.

‘About – who?’ she blurted out.

Roark sank down in the chair at her desk and crossed his long legs. His voice still sounded carefully measured, as if he had planned every word.

‘Ah, you don’t know him under that name, of course. My mistake.’

She didn’t dare to speak. She had no idea what he expected from her, and something about the look on his face told her she didn’t want to go along with whatever his plan was – Garreth. How much did he know? Just that he had *been* here? Or did he realise that Garreth had been the thief plaguing his stepfather’s court – did he know where he lived?

‘Your Highness – I don’t –’

‘Your... Lord Griffith,’ he interrupted her. ‘I understand you didn’t know it was not his true name at all?’

Zovinar shook her head. Her tongue refused to move.

‘Well.’ Roark looked quite amused about her silence, in a deadly, colourless way. ‘In that case I’m glad I thought of warning you. He may not have had the most honourable intentions with your company, you see.’

Honourable. A shiver ran through her. His kiss of last night. *Forgive me*. His hands on her bare thighs – his lips between her legs.

‘What – what do you mean?’

‘You’ve never heard of him?’

‘Of – what? Of that name? I –’

‘Of his treason,’ Roark interrupted her.

Zovinar stared at him, her mouth dry. *Treason?* Garreth, with his hatred of ingenuity, of disloyalty, of lies? Impossible – what had he said, that first evening? After the court betrayed men he loved like brothers?

‘Let me enlighten you,’ the crown prince continued, still in that same, coldly amused voice. ‘It is better if you know the story, considering his apparent interest in you. I suppose you know about the king’s – well, sons, for lack of a better word?’

‘Not in detail – it happened before...’

‘Before you came here. Yes.’ He chuckled his tongue. ‘Well. Ulrick married my mother a good nine years ago. Was kind enough not to care that she was a widow. Took me and my little sister in as his own children. Which appears to have angered his sons.’

Zovinar swallowed. The princes of Copper Coast – Marick and Brecken. She had heard their names only on a whisper, as if they were ghosts still haunting the palace, shadows of the past who might jump at anyone who mentioned them out loud. Monsters, the tales said, both of them. Cruel and jealous. Never worth much when they grew up, and yet they still managed to do far, far worse than the court had ever expected from them.

‘They – harmed the queen, didn’t they?’

‘Let’s keep it at that, yes,’ Roark said coolly. ‘There’s no need to go into more detail.’

Even the rumours didn’t mention the details, although the rough lines of the story had loomed up from the allusions and vague references – after years of hurtful words and harassment, the young men’s cruelty had culminated in some horrible incident taking place in the queen’s bedroom, something involving knives and clothes stripped off. Her stomach revolted. Monsters, yes – but Garreth?

‘But what does that have to do with...’

‘Your Lord Griffith? He was a friend of them.’

‘He – *what?*’

Roark smiled. ‘Unpleasant, isn’t it?’

A *friend*? No, impossible – *Garreth*? With his boyish grin, the laughter in his eyes? But – oh, gods. Men he had loved like brothers. The court turning its back on them. Why did it have to fit so perfectly?

She struggled to contain herself under Roark’s piercing eyes. He couldn’t know. He couldn’t even *suspect* how much of herself she had given to a man who had

apparently condoned his mother's ordeals –

Garreth?

'Yes,' she managed. Her voice sounded unnaturally stiff to her own ears. 'Yes, that's really very unpleasant – but I may hope he didn't *excuse* what they did to your mother, did he?'

'Oh, worse,' Roark said, examining her with sharp eyes. 'He continued the work.'

'He *continued*?'

'Garreth.' A faint expression of disgust, as if he tasted the name on his thin lips. 'Not a lord at all, in case you were wondering. Orphaned son of one of Ulrick's knights. Grew up here. You'd think he'd be grateful enough to leave his queen alone, rather than threatening her and –'

'He *threatened* her?'

'I'll spare you his exact wording, but it involved an unpleasant amount of violence.' Her shock seemed to amuse him. 'Ulrick banned him from the kingdom as well, and we didn't hear from him for five years until I caught a glimpse of the back of his head when he fled the ball two nights ago. I asked around, and this morning an old friend in town told me she had seen him in some hostel there – going by the name of Griffith now.'

She hadn't betrayed him, then, at least it wasn't her fault – but *should* she have betrayed him, if he was truly one of the monsters who had treated Edelin so cruelly?

And what had made him come back now? Not a change of heart, if she could go by his anger at the court. But stealing jewellery was a strangely minimal act of revenge for a banishment – did he have anything else up his sleeve? Anything he hadn't told her about?

'Do you have any idea why he's here?' she managed.

'Which is exactly what I'd like to ask you.' Roark smiled at her. An attempt at a friendly smile, perhaps, but it looked too smug, too reproaching – if you hadn't been so unwilling to help us two nights ago, that smile said, we might already have figured out why he returned to the city. 'Are you sure he didn't speak about his plans? Please understand...' His smile turned colder. 'He's not a man to shy away from violence. Any information may help us save lives. It would be highly regrettable if you forgot to inform me of anything important.'

Save lives? From *Garreth*? And yet – if it was true – if he had known about the attack on Edelin, *cooperated*, even... Again her nausea stirred. Had he still been acting last night, pretending to be a kinder man than he was? But why?

'I just don't understand...' She had to stay calm. She had to *look* calm, at the very least. 'He was really very nice to me – why would he...'

'A very good question.' It sounded like he had been waiting for it. 'Did he make any suggestions of seeing you again? Any hints at his return? He might perhaps be

using you as a way to sneak into the palace and continue whatever unholy plans he has for my family.'

Using her. Garreth. *Forgive me* – oh, please, no.

'Are you sure he really...'

The words died away on her tongue. Was he *sure*? Was she really going to ask him whether the man who had threatened his mother might truly have unpleasant plans? She *knew* Garreth hated the court, she knew he still considered himself a friend of the princes – what was there to doubt about?

'Never mind,' she said feebly. 'I – I'll be careful.'

'Thank you, Lady Zovinar.' He stood up, with a small bow. 'I'll leave you alone, then.'

She heard herself utter some greeting, and didn't register his reply; then he was gone, and around her the room was turning like a festival carousel. Friends like brothers. Ulrick's sons. Cruel, malicious men, all stories said the same, and *those* were the old friends in whose honour he was snatching jewellery from the ballroom? If Roark's story was true – and how could it not be? – Garreth had to be an entirely different man than the handsome, gentle thief he had presented to her last night.

But that kiss. *Forgive me*. The pleasure he had made her feel. His arms around her as she slid onto the floor. His lips on her forehead.

Oh, gods. Could all of that have been a lie?

CHAPTER 8

Garreth should have been warned by the silence. Never a good sign, a full room of people abruptly going quiet over their lunch – but he was too immersed in his own thoughts to look up from the bar and look what was going on behind his back. Silver and burglary and the memory of hands wandering into places where they really should know to stay away, too much to think about... He barely registered the footsteps. Only when the empty barstool beside him scraped back over the coarse wooden floor, he jerked up.

Two cold, black eyes stared back at him, accompanied by a smile that could have made the paint at the walls flake.

Garreth froze. The thoughts vanished from his mind for one everlasting heartbeat as his body chilled down to the bone, pinned in its place by that look that had haunted him in his nightmares for five years – no. No. Impossible. He had to be hallucinating, had to be...

‘Hello, Garreth,’ Roark said.

Behind him the first whispers rose. Garreth. Not the name they knew for him here. He had to run, part of his mind was pressing, he had to jump from his stool and sprint and hope for the best – but this was Roark, not any louche moneylender holding a grudge, and the bastard had probably surrounded the hostel with guards at the very least.

But he hadn't sent his guards in *first*, hadn't dragged him out in chains before even speaking a word to him. What in the world was that supposed to mean?

He had to say something. Whatever was going on – he had to say something.

‘Morning,’ he managed, and it sounded nearly normal, too. ‘Or afternoon, perhaps. Anything to drink?’

Roark's thin lips curled up another dangerous fraction. Without answer, he turned to the room behind Garreth's back and said, louder now, ‘Please continue your conversations. It wasn't my intention to spoil your meals.’

With some tense coughs and hesitations, the chatting picked up again, although Garreth could still feel the glances at his back. Roark sat down beside him, folded his bony arms on the bar and leisurely added, ‘Interesting place, this. Rats gnawing

at your toes at night, probably?’

‘At times,’ Garreth said. His hands felt damp, but he managed to keep them from trembling as he wrapped them around his glass. Why did the bastard even make an attempt at conversation? He should have been arrested or dead already. ‘Not the worst company I’ve had.’

Roark sniggered. ‘Still can’t keep your mouth shut when you should, can you?’

‘As if you’d believe I’m overjoyed to see your pretty blue eyes again.’

‘Fair point. May have something to do with you showing up in a kingdom that exiled you to steal from the court’s guests. Somehow that doesn’t scream remorse to me.’

Garreth closed his eyes, flares of fury breaking through the cold layer of fear. Remorse. Coming from the man who had fed his mother’s poisonous stream of lies to the eager ears of the court, the man who had laughed at Ulrick’s tears. The man, too, who had hosted a ball to celebrate the news of the arrow that had struck Brecken in the eye and killed him in a Riverlands border village four years ago.

‘What do you want from me?’ he managed between clenched teeth.

‘Why did you come back?’

‘None of your concern.’

Roark chuckled his tongue. ‘I beg to differ, old friend. You might be threatening the stability of my kingdom, you see. As the crown prince, it’s my responsibility to...’

Crown prince. His knuckles burned with white-hot hatred. Marick’s title – Marick’s right, and he could still see the tears in his friend’s eyes as if they had parted ways yesterday. Spitting out a laugh, he shook his head.

‘You care about stability as much as you care about your honour. What do you want?’

‘I’d mind my words a little, Garreth,’ Roark said, his thin upper lip curling up. ‘You forget I can call in my guards and slit your throat right here and right now, and not even Ulrick would bat an eye.’

Suddenly he could see himself lying on the stained floorboards, the pool of blood growing around his corpse. His heart shrunk in his chest. Not even Ulrick. Who had treated him as a third son in all but name after his father’s death, who had betrayed him as easily as he had abandoned his own flesh and blood – he wouldn’t care, not a single soul at the court that had been his home would grieve for him.

Except, perhaps –

Zovinar.

She would notice his absence, at least, would perhaps even shed a tear at his disappearance, and somehow the thought of *anyone* caring about his life, even if it was a duchess who barely knew more about him than his name, shook a spark of clarity back into his frightened mind. He was staying alive for *someone*.

‘So why haven’t you yet?’ he said.

Roark's eyes narrowed. 'I repeat, what are you doing here?'

Was that a hint of fear, a glimpse of anguish? Suddenly Garreth understood. The bastard had to know he wouldn't return to the capital for the pleasure of it, and that his loot from the court could pay for far more than a shabby hostel and some lousy meals. He should realise, too, that five years or even Brecken's death wouldn't have erased his desire to see justice done.

What if he had found evidence of Edelin's lies in the meantime? What if he had friends in the city who would speak up even if Roark slit his throat now? It didn't matter how meagre the results of his search for Marick were, because at least Roark didn't know – and the suggestion of a result was the only card he had left to play.

'You look worried,' he said, leaning back on his stool. 'Would nearly say your conscience is haunting you – but that presupposes the existence of such a conscience in the first place.'

'Answer my damn *question*.'

'What I'm doing here?' He shrugged. 'Rounding up a couple of leads I found in the past years. I won't bore you with the details.'

Perhaps he was getting delusional, but Roark's pale skin seemed another shade paler now, even in the grey, dusty light of the hostel room. The man's joyless laugh didn't sound entirely convincing, either.

'You'll be out of this city tomorrow morning.'

Garreth hesitated, his heart hammering in his chest. Tomorrow morning. Out of the city. Which meant he would still be alive by that time –

'And in case you think you can be clever,' Roark interrupted his thoughts, his voice a smooth, flat line, 'and plan to stay around to present whatever leads you believe you have to Ulrick – the only reason I'm allowing you around for a single more night is that my people will be using that night to gather the names of every single person you've been speaking to since you arrived in this city. If I still catch a glimpse of you after this night, they'll be dead and done. All of them, whether I suspect they're in on your plans or not. Am I clear?'

It came out so easily, so casually, that it took Garreth a moment too long to grasp the meaning of his words. Every single person. His fellow hostel guests. The men of the pub around the corner. Flatnose. And –

Zovinar?

Fear clawed through his chest, tearing through his heart and lungs until he was barely able to breathe. Zovinar. The bastard had to know they had danced at that cursed ball, had to know they had at least exchanged a *few* words –

'Thinking about the girl?' Roark said, his smile broadening.

'Oh, for hell's sake, aren't you done yet?'

Roark cocked his head, speaking even more slowly now. 'You really should know better than to go around wooing pretty young ladies while committing treason, Garreth. It makes you so pleasantly vulnerable –'

Suddenly he was standing, his fist clenched too tightly it was trembling. ‘*What* did you do to –’

‘To Lady Zovinar?’ Roark laughed. ‘Not a single thing. She’s happily picking flowers at the moment, or whatever else they –’

‘Don’t lie to me.’ As if the bastard would leave her alone if there was even the tiniest chance she knew anything of value. As if he would ever believe she had no idea of his identity. This was *Roark*, who could smell lies like a bloodhound smelled his prey –

‘Why would I harm her, Garreth?’ Those damned, cold eyes – taunting him, measuring him out. ‘She’s been nothing but helpful to me. No reason to go after her.’

His frantic train of thoughts slammed to a painful halt. Nothing but helpful? *Zovinar*? As if she had just told Roark all she knew about him – but for the gods’ sake, she would know better than that, wouldn’t she? He had *warned* her. He had told her the rumour of his name alone might kill him.

But how else had Roark even known he had returned?

A sudden unease writhed through him. The ball? Perhaps the bastard had noticed him at the ball. But that had been two nights ago, there was no reason for Edelin’s son to have waited this long if he had recognised him in the ballroom already. The only other person who had known...

Impossible. Why would she spread the truth about him? After last night – that dance, that kiss, her breathless surrender to his tongue – why?

Nothing but helpful.

‘Did she tell you?’ His voice sounded too hoarse. ‘Did she give you my name?’

Roark smirked, a wide smirk of undiluted triumph. ‘Oh, Garreth. As I said – it makes you far too vulnerable, trying to impress the –’

‘Get out.’

‘You’re speaking to a crown prince, Garreth. Try a little politeness and –’

‘Get *out*.’ His mind was collapsing, the brittle pile of things he had thought to know for sure – he had thought she would be *different*, truly believed it, and yet she had betrayed him? ‘You’ve said more than enough – do you really want to revel in it?’

‘I quite enjoy revelling in your stupidity, to tell you the truth.’ Roark grinned. ‘But I’ll be the wiser man and leave you some time to pack. Be sure to disappear before sunrise. I’d hate for my men to still find you here tomorrow morning.’

The unspoken threat was clear and loud in the undertone of his voice. Leave, or they die. Stay away, or they die. Garreth closed his eyes, battling his recoiling stomach – he should be grateful for a chance at life after the news of his name had spread. But the way in which it had...

‘I’ll be gone,’ he forced himself to say, and Roark chuckled.

‘Wise for once.’

Around him the conversations dimmed again as the other man strode out again, his heels loud and confident on the wooden floor. Garreth could feel the eyes, the silent questions, the first unspoken conclusions – hell, they would understand the story soon enough. Another name. A visit from the crown prince. And now he would disappear like a ghost before the sun rose again, leaving them with all time and opportunity to guess and gossip about his history until he would be utterly forgotten again.

Until all he had tried to do would be forgotten. Until Marick and Brecken would be forgotten.

He must have stormed upstairs, must have reached his room somehow; he found himself back sitting on the edge of his bed with his head between his hands and his breath spiralling out of control, cursing himself with all his might. *Idiot. Idiot.* What had he thought? That he might just as well place his trust in some girl he hadn't known for half an hour, tell her his name, allow her to follow him to his hostel without a thought at his security? Of course she was a danger. He was just a fun escape to her, nothing that would convince her to risk her own safety for his... Had she told Roark directly? Or had the rumour reached him through the whispers at court – had she told the other girls, had one of those little liars informed their governesses?

Did it even matter? He had believed her and she had betrayed him. Now what was he going to do?

Leave. He had no choice. He had to tell Flatnose, arrange another way to pay his debt and flee the city like he had fled it once before, five years ago. Give up on his attempts to find Marick. Give up on any evidence he might find of Edelin's lies. All because of one ridiculous moment of trust, one stupid girl who couldn't keep her mouth shut.

Stupid. The word still hurt. He could still hear her, laughing and moaning as he held her, as if her voice had never left his room at all – and yet she had exposed him to the one man who should never have found out about him? Garreth fell back into his blankets, his thoughts a tangle of thorny edges. He had to pack. He had to start arranging whatever he could arrange in the few hours he had left. But all he could think about –

Zovinar – damn you, Zovinar, why did you betray me?

CHAPTER 9

‘Zovinar?’

The voice outside her bedroom door sounded a little too pressing. Zovinar forced herself to pull the pillow away from her face and open her eyes – her room had gone dark over the past hour, and she hadn't bothered to light a candle. For the gods' sake, how was she going explain that to whoever was standing at the door? As if Roark's visit to the ladies' wing hadn't piqued enough of their curiosity yet.

‘Zovinar, are you awake?’

Only then did she recognise the voice. Viviette.

‘Oh. Come in.’

The princess slipped inside and shut the door behind her. No remarks at the darkness. No questions about the dinner where both of them should have appeared around this time.

‘I just heard Roark visited you again?’

Zovinar didn't want to talk about Roark. She didn't want to explain how stupid she had been, how she should have known better than to pursue some man who was a criminal even by his own account – what had she expected from this madness except for hurt and heartbreak?

‘He did.’

‘You don't look like he had anything pleasant to say.’

There was no mockery in the other girl's voice. Zovinar forced herself to sit up, because at least sitting up she might look a little more sensible, and muttered, ‘Not really.’

‘So what did he want from you?’

‘Warn me.’

‘Is that supposed to mean he threatened you, or...’

‘No – no. I don't think so.’ Or had he? What would he do if he found out she had lied to him, that she *had* known more about Garreth than she had wanted him to believe? ‘He – I just...’

Viviette waited beside the closed door, quiet and yet strangely reassuring. *She* hadn't called the guards on Garreth either, at least. She hadn't thought it would be a

terrible idea to sneak away in the middle of the night to find a thief who happened to have lost a stamp card.

‘He spoke about the princes,’ Zovinar blurted out, and suddenly the words wouldn’t stop falling out anymore. ‘Garreth – his real name is Garreth – and Roark said he was a friend of the princes – of Marick and Brecken – that he threatened to *hurt* the queen even after they had already been banished – that Ulrick banished him too...’

She fell silent, her breath whistling in her throat. At the door, Viviette’s silhouette slowly tilted her head. The gesture didn’t look nearly as shocked as it should have been.

‘Sounds like a good man.’

‘Like a – what?’

‘Your friend. Did you say his name was Garreth?’ She stepped forward in the darkness and sank down in the desk chair, his voice somewhere between amused and grim. ‘Starting to see why he started stealing from the court, too.’

‘What...’ Zovinar managed a baffled laugh. ‘What in the world are you talking about?’

‘Marick and Brecken. The poor boys.’

‘*Poor boys?*’

‘I’d be willing to wager my soul on their innocence, to tell you the truth.’

‘Their *innocence*? But – but everybody says...’

‘Edelin got into that marriage only to get her own son on the throne,’ Viviette interrupted her bitterly. ‘Took her two years to get her accusations into Ulrick’s head, and nobody stopped her – if anything the court was happy to echo her lies around even after the poor boys had already been banned. Garreth must have been one of the few standing up for them.’

Zovinar gaped at her, dumbfounded.

‘It’s one of those things nobody talks about here,’ Viviette added, as if to reassure her. ‘So of course you’ve never heard any other version of –’

‘But how do *you* know?’

‘Our Spymaster.’ Viviette produced a wry chuckle. ‘May be a jerk, but he does admittedly have a rather useful habit of knowing things.’

The Spymaster of the Peaks. Good gods. She had heard the stories about him – an Androughan immigrant, King Trystan’s closest confidant, a man who was rumoured to walk through walls and see through mirrors. If even *he* was convinced of the princes’ innocence, Garreth had to be innocent as well. Then Roark –

Don’t spread that name. It may kill me.

Oh, gods.

‘Zovinar?’

She was already standing, her hands suddenly itching, her blood rushing in her ears. Roark had known his hostel. How long could he need to find his old enemy?

Her coat – her shoes – what else would she need? Money? Would he need money if he needed to flee?

‘Zovinar, what are you *doing*?’

‘Roark knows Garreth is here. I have to warn him – if he finds him...’

‘Do you realise he may already have found him?’

‘That’s not making it any better!’

‘I’m not trying to make it *better*.’ Viviette’s voice soared up. ‘Zovinar, you can be very damned sure Roark already knows you’ve been lying to him. The only reason he’s keeping his hands off you is that he has no decent evidence and he knows people like me would cause him trouble – but if you dash into that hostel again while his men are around he *will* –’

‘So what would you suggest I do, then? Nothing?’

The silence was short, but deafening, tense like a scale at the last moment before tipping. Then Viviette slowly said, ‘I’m not saying you shouldn’t go.’

‘What?’

‘You could go. If you really want to warn him. It would be pretty honourable and brave too, if you ask me. Just saying you should be aware it might also be –’

‘Stupid,’ Zovinar finished bitterly.

‘Dangerous,’ Viviette corrected her.

Again they were silent for a moment. Dangerous. Roark might catch her, yes. The ladies would hear. Uncle Rusuvan would hear. But the alternative...

She couldn’t even allow the image into her mind’s eye – Garreth, chained by his wrists and ankles, dragged to the gallows while Elena fainted beside her and the crowd cheered at the noose around his neck. Oh, for hell’s sake. Did it matter she hadn’t known him for more than two nights? In two nights he had done more for her than the rest of the world in the past two years, and even if he’d have to flee, even if she’d never see him again, how could she stand by while some deceitful crown prince was trying to *kill* him?

She pulled her coat from the chair beside her bed without another word. If she had to be stupid, she might at least do it bravely.

*H*ow fast could recklessness become a habit?

She slipped into the ratty hostel as if she did it on a daily basis, ignoring the glares from the other guests sitting in the hall and the common room behind. Nobody here who looked like a knight in disguise. Most knights had a few more teeth, at least. Which could mean they hadn’t found him yet – or that they had already left again?

‘He’s upstairs,’ the bald innkeeper grumbled before she could even open her mouth.

‘Oh.’ She tried to give him a smile, but he had already turned away from her. ‘Thank you.’

He didn’t react. She could feel the eyes burning in her back as she hurried up the stairs, where every step creaked as if she might fall through any moment. Second floor. Third room to the left. The door was closed, but a faint shine of fire came through the keyhole. Still no sign of trouble – no sign of Roark.

Yet when she knocked, the room remained silent.

Zovinar waited for half a minute, then knocked again, a little louder. Inside, muffled through the thin wood of the door, his voice snapped, ‘I’m busy!’

Her knees nearly buckled with relief. ‘Garreth?’

And again, for a heartbeat, that deafening silence.

Then the door flew open, revealing him pale and rumpled, his shirt only partly buttoned, his blond curls a mess. Behind him, bags and clothes lay thrown through the room; in the ominous light of his small fire, it looked as if someone had been searching his belongings. His breath came with a stench of alcohol, pungent enough to smell him on two feet away.

‘*You?*’

He nearly spat the word into her face. Zovinar jumped back as if he had pulled a knife at her, her breath catching in her throat – ‘Garreth?’

‘What for hell’s sake are *you* doing here?’ His voice sounded hoarse, haunted, a growl of confusion. ‘Coming to help me pack? Checking if I’m leaving fast enough to your taste? Trying to –’

‘*Leaving?*’

‘Would you rather have seen me *die*?’

Zovinar stared at him, her heart racing. Leaving? *Leaving*? Why would he flee the city all of a sudden – except...

‘Has – has Roark been here already?’

‘Did you think he’d wait?’ He spat out a gruff laugh. ‘That he’d give me another week to look for Marick, perhaps? Allow me into the palace for a few afternoons to interrogate witnesses? Of course he was here already, what did you *think*?’

That last near-shout left a ringing silence behind, broken only by his heaving breath. The air in her lungs had frozen. What had she thought? Had she thought anything at all? She had believed Roark’s lies for a few hours too long, yes, but could he truly blame her for never having heard another story?

‘I don’t understand –’

‘I *warned* you, for hell’s sake!’ His voice grew louder and louder. He looked like the man he had been in that garden again – the man who had held her and threatened her. ‘I told you to keep your mouth shut about my name – so what made you think you might as well go blathering around? Or did you just forget you weren’t supposed to? I should damn well...’

‘Wait – what – Garreth, I didn’t –’

‘... have believed you were too stupid to keep a secret!’

The words burst from his mouth like arrows aimed at the heart, leaving a cold, bleeding silence behind. He glared at her, fists clenched and face contorted in a furious grimace, as if to assess the damage done – as if to wait for her to crumble and cry and beg for forgiveness.

Zovinar stood paralysed, unable even to crumble.

Too stupid. *Too stupid?* But she *hadn't* told Roark. She hadn't told Roark even when she had believed Garreth might be guilty of unspeakable crimes, because she *had* remembered.

Something hardened inside her at the sight of his flushed face, at his words still ringing in her ears. Something she felt so rarely that she needed five painful heartbeats to recognize the feeling welling up in her – an anger so bitter she could taste the bile in the back of her throat.

‘I didn’t tell anyone anything.’

She had never known she could sound so calm, so resolute; her voice was a stranger’s voice to her own ears. The scowl on Garreth’s face faltered.

‘You – what?’

‘I didn’t tell anyone your name.’ The words burnt on her tongue. Too stupid. *Too stupid.* ‘Roark recognised you when you left the ball. Someone saw you in the city.’

Garreth stared at her, the rage sinking from his face. ‘You didn’t...’

‘I wanted to *warn* you,’ she interrupted him, her voice rising. ‘He came to ask me about you and I told me you were some traitor and –’

‘I’m *not* a traitor, for hell’s sake!’

‘And I’m not *stupid!*’ She stumbled back, towards the stairs, her sight suddenly blurred by tears. The disappointment was clogging her throat, thick and nauseating. ‘I’m not, I’m not, I’m not, and *you* should know...’

‘Zovinar, wait – I didn’t want to –’

‘You *said* it! Didn’t you think it?’

He hesitated for a fraction of a heartbeat too long, and she was already running.

‘Zovinar!’

She didn’t stop, dashed down the stairs and burst back into the hall without looking back – out, away from here, before anyone could see the tears running over her face. Stupid. *Stupid.* Flung into her face like a fist, aimed to hit where it hurt the most.

‘Zovinar!’

The dark of the night swallowed her, and she ran until she could no longer feel her legs. Damn his kisses, damn his gentle hands – and damn his packed bags too, damn whatever threats would drive him from the city. What was the worth of all charming smiles in the world if he used her trust as a weapon against her at the first

suspicion?

But she found herself sagging onto the steps of the ferry quay when she finally reached the water, and sobbed until it felt as if her head would break apart.

CHAPTER 10

‘Zovinar!’

She was already gone.

Empty streets, the glares of the few passers-by, a few sniggers in the common room behind him. No trace of her blue cloak, and the sound of her footsteps had already died away around some corner. Garreth stumbled to a standstill on the sandy streets and cursed out loud, the aftertaste of alcohol biting in his throat. His head was swimming, in what had been a comforting haze of intoxication five minutes ago and felt like an infuriating lack of sensibility now – hell’s sake, what had he *done*?

Should have believed you were too stupid.

He staggered back against the wooden wall of the house neighbouring the hostel, covering his face with his hands. His words. Fallen over his lips. Disgust washed over him – he should follow her, he could probably catch up with her before she reached the ferry. But what was he going to *say*? The drunken haze, Roark’s lies, his fury and frustration over his debts and the lack of even a single clue of Marick’s whereabouts – but none of those excuses could justify the fact that he had hurled those words into her face in a deliberate desire to hurt, to do all harm he could still do in the few hours he had left to take his revenge.

His *revenge*. A bitter, gag-like laugh fell over his lips as he sank onto the cold ground. Revenge for what, exactly? Now, with his mind so abruptly cleared up by the tears in her eyes, it seemed so ridiculous that he could no longer imagine overlooking it for a full evening – even if she had betrayed him, he should have known Roark wouldn’t have told him the entire story, the threats he might have employed, the tricks and ruses. He should have trusted her. He should, at the very least, have given her the benefit of the doubt until he had heard her version of events. Just because he happened to be convinced that the world was populated by liars and pretenders...

He had grabbed the first chance to fit her into his own fears. This was his just reward. His own damn problem to deal with –

Except that she hadn’t done anything wrong, and he had hurled that unforgivable insult at her just as easily.

Another curse fell over his lips. What did it matter now? He had always known he was a spiteful bastard, and now she knew it too. Little sense in begging for forgiveness if he wasn't even convinced he deserved it himself – and either way he didn't have the time to beg for anything. Sunrise was barely eight hours away. Better to make sure he was a few miles away from the city by that time, just in case Roark had second thoughts about his clemency. He still had to pack his belongings, he still had to deal with his debts.

Perhaps it was better if she believed he didn't care. She'd never see him again anyway, and now at least she wouldn't have to miss him.

He ignored the mocking glances and remarks as he made his way back inside, trudged back up the stairs with legs forged from lead. Clothes. Knives. His inkpot, his razor, the last few coins he possessed. It easily fitted into the single bag from which he had lived for the past five years. Only the bottle of liquor stayed behind – the cursed thing had done enough damage already tonight.

Was that all? It felt too easy – just walking out and pulling the door shut as if he had never lived in this room for months, as if this wasn't the place where a timid duchess had dashed into his life and somehow transformed into the enchanting woman who had wandered through his dreams for the rest of the night... For the gods' sake, he had to stop thinking about her. By now she had to regret the madness of last night, how much she had trusted him – a blessing that at least he hadn't gone any further, that he had somehow held back even at the temptation of her soft hands, her kisses –

The fire of his desire stirred again, twisting in his gut like some caged animal. For hell's sake, he scolded himself, *stop* it. She's gone, and it's better that she is. Scrape yourself together. Pay for your room. Find someone to give you a ride to any other place. Get out of this city before Roark gets the idea of following you, don't waste another thought at her.

But when he was counting out his copper, desperately trying to smother his memories with the more urgent troubles of his empty purse, his host leaned over and said, 'Any message I can take for the young lady?'

The amusement in his voice was shamelessly audible, and Garreth nearly cursed out loud.

'No.'

'You don't need to pass on when you'll be –'

'I won't be back,' he interrupted, brusquely, 'and neither will she.'

'A pity to hear, Griffith.' A grin. 'Or whatever the name is. Anything else?'

Garreth swung his bag onto his shoulders and shrugged. 'If a fellow named Flatnose appears one of these days – tell him I'll contact him as soon as I have a place to stay. He'll get his money. If he hasn't yet figured out why I'm leaving – tell him his life was in danger.'

His host didn't even blink. 'Noted.'

‘Thanks.’

Then he was out, back onto the nightly streets, walking towards the markets where he would hopefully find some merchant leaving the city tonight. Seven hours until sunrise. Zovinar would be back in her room by now. Not a chance left to reach her – not that he wanted to reach her in the first place, of course...

Garreth abruptly stood still, as if his feet had taken root in the mud of the streets. Oh, gods be damned. Who was he trying to delude?

This was not how he wanted to leave. A thief in the night? Fine, he had long ago learned to give up on his honour and honesty. But the kind of bastard who hurt a kind-hearted woman to the core, then disappeared without a trace – that was a man he didn’t want to be, just like he hadn’t wanted to be that violent jerk who made innocent ladies cry in pitch-dark gardens.

So what was he supposed to do, then? Leave a message after all? Sorry for calling you stupid, you’re really very bright, and I still dream of the way you collapsed to pleasure in my arms – as if that would make anyone feel better. If he couldn’t come up with anything decent, he might as well just leave. But there had to be *something* he could do, something to make up for at least a fraction of the hurt.

Well.

He was still a thief.

The idea unfolded in his chest with sudden, unsettling clarity. Absolute madness, far too dangerous, and still not his concern – but good gods, she *wasn’t* stupid, and even if she never wanted to see him again, the least he could do was convince her of that fact. She wasn’t a liar. She wasn’t a pretender. She deserved to know the truth.

With a sharp turn he turned his back on the ferry and market squares. Off to Willow Avenue.

The night sky was already turning lighter in the east when he finally sneaked into Ulrick’s palace gardens, through the nettle-covered hole in the fence where he had sneaked away with Marick to go swimming on summer nights. Roughly an hour, and the first sunrays would be peeking over the horizon. Woefully little time to figure out where in the ladies’ wing she was sleeping, convince her to come out and explain the situation to her – but he’d have to manage, some way or another.

The gardens were deserted at this early time, but under the merciless rows of windows staring down at him, that was hardly a comfort. One of the rooms behind the ivy-covered walls of this wing. But some thirty young ladies stayed at Ulrick’s court at any given moment, and he couldn’t just knock on a couple of doors and hope he’d be lucky – so what options did he have? Threaten someone to get her

location out of them? Roark would hear, and probably before he was safely out again.

Above his head, on the first floor, a window opened.

Garreth instinctively stepped closer to the wall, hiding in the shadow of the ivy. From the open window, a slender girl appeared, grabbing the vines to climb down – what in the world? Was every single lady in this place escaping the governesses' eyes this way?

This girl at least looked like she was used to the climb; she reached the ground in a minute, wiping her hands at the skirts of her simple linen dress. Only then, turning around on some fifteen feet away from him, did her eyes fall on him.

She didn't scream. She didn't even run. She tilted her head as if she was a physician considering her diagnosis, examining him for three heartbeats of ice-cold silence.

'Ah,' she then said. She sounded too cynical for her age. 'Interesting. I thought you'd be wise enough to be miles away from here by now.'

Garreth's heart skipped a beat. 'Beg your pardon?'

'Garreth, isn't it?'

Even in the darkness, her look was unpleasantly amused. He took a deep breath. If she knew who he was – if she knew the threats Roark had made – there were two options. Either she knew the crown prince, in which case he was a dead man. Or...

'Have we met?' he said.

'One-sidedly,' she said dryly. 'The name's Viviette. Pleasure.'

Viviette. Crown princess of the Peaks. Now he remembered – *she scares them all off*, Zovinar had said, and under that persistent glare, it suddenly didn't seem so impossible anymore. How did she know his name? As a crown princess of another kingdom she *had* probably met with Roark every now and then – but would the bastard trust her that much?

'I suppose you're here for Zovinar?' she added, and his thoughts came to an abrupt standstill. Perhaps Roark hadn't been the source of her knowledge after all.

'I – would like to speak with her, yes.'

'Suppose you would.' She snorted. 'Do you have anything decent to say? Because she's been a mess for most of the night, and I'm not going to wake her and give up my morning walk if you're only going to upset her further. Don't think you'll help her with some lacklustre apologies only meant to soothe your own conscience.'

He closed his eyes. A mess for most of the night. Damn his thoughtlessness – and she was right, if he had only been here to apologise, he might as well not have shown up. But there was his loot of the night too, sitting safely in the chest pocket of his coat.

'It's not just that,' he said, looking up. 'There's something I need to give her. Something I need to tell her, too. About – about her uncle.'

Viviette was silent for a few seconds. Then she sighed, and suddenly she no longer sounded so wry, so indifferent.

‘You weren’t just toying around with her, were you? I mean – you did really...’

Her sentence died away. Garreth sucked in a breath, his chest suddenly too heavy to contain the air in his lungs. Toying around. That first evening, perhaps, the ball where it had been such an unexpected delight to see what he could find behind that prim lady’s façade – but it had been everything but a game since she had walked into his hostel and turned out to be five times the woman he had believed she might be.

‘No,’ he said, hoarsely. There was no sense in lying. He didn’t assume she would help him for anything but the truth. ‘I wasn’t toying around. She’s been – kind to me in a way nobody has been for a very long time. She...’

Now he was the one to hesitate. Being honest to her was the easy part. Being honest to himself...

‘She means a lot to me,’ he finished, and the words stung a twisting, nauseating path through him. In which case you shouldn’t have called her stupid, Viviette should say. In which case you shouldn’t have blamed her for your own carelessness, running around where Roark could easily recognise you. But she stepped back, glanced up along the ivy, and nodded.

‘The arbour in the lavender garden should be quiet.’

‘What?’

‘Knights will be passing this spot in ten minutes or so. They always do around this time.’ She nodded at the sprawling gardens behind him. ‘I’ve never run into anyone around the lavender garden on my morning walks. I’ll tell her to go find you there.’

Garreth stared at her. She gave him a thin smile.

‘And if you ever find Marick – please say hello from me, will you?’

Then she was climbing back up, without waiting for another word.

CHAPTER 11

Zovinar found him behind the fence of the lavender garden, sitting in the grass beside the elegant arbour.

Shoulders hunched, head lowered. A full bag next to him. Somehow his broad-shouldered silhouette seemed smaller than it had been a night ago – when he had danced with her in his hotel room and called her beautiful and made her feel that unspeakable pleasure that curled through her guts again at the memory alone.

When he had been acting. He must have been. From charming nobleman to threatening rogue to charming thief to a man who had called her stupid in the full knowledge of the hurt it would cause – and now? Had he come back to add another layer of pleasant charm over the face he had shown her tonight?

But he didn't give the impression he was planning to embark on a charm offensive when she stepped from the dusky foliage and he looked up, abruptly as if he expected her to draw a knife at him.

For a heartbeat she stood frozen, unable to decide what to say, or what to do, or where to look. He looked like himself. His handsome face exhausted, his blond curls messy as if they hadn't seen a pillow anywhere in the past hours. Not a trace of that boyish smile around his lips. Nowhere like the furious stranger who had shouted at her from a hostel room mere hours ago, either.

'Zovinar,' he said.

She swallowed. His hoarse voice was a plea, mingled with disgust at himself, like when he had so abruptly released her wrists on the evening of the ball...

Not that *that* had stopped him from shouting at her two nights later, she reminded herself. She wasn't doubting. She certainly wasn't crying. She had her pride, gods be damned.

'Well,' she said. 'I thought you were leaving?'

'I – I was.'

The hesitation in his voice. Oh, gods. Either he was a very good actor, or –

Or what? He *was* a very good actor. She had seen it that first night already, why would she make a fool of herself by allowing herself to believe anything else? That lost look in his eyes didn't matter. She had to be strong now, she had to stand her ground for *once*.

‘But?’

He closed his eyes. ‘Zovinar – I wanted you to know – I shouldn’t have said...’

‘No,’ she said bitterly. ‘Glad we agree. So?’

‘I’m – not here to ask you to forgive me.’ He sucked in a breath, looked up to meet her gaze. ‘I wanted to give you something.’

‘Give me...’

‘If I’m honest – it’s yours already. So it’s a worthless gift from that perspective.’ He stepped forward, cautious as if she were a shy animal he might scare away, and stretched out his clenched fist. ‘But I thought you might like to have it nonetheless.’

His fingers folded back. In the palm of his hand, barely recognizable in the dusky morning light, lay a signet ring.

Her signet ring.

Zovinar stared at it, too stupefied to even blink. Her *ring*? She hadn’t seen it in four years, it had spent the time in a lawyer’s vault since her arrival in the city – as Uncle Rusuvan had wanted. Too much of a danger to let it linger about, he had said, imagine she’d lose it like she always lost her stuff.

‘That – how – ’

‘You should have it,’ he said, his voice strangely pressing. ‘It’s yours.’

‘But – I *do* have it – I always had it?’

‘Could you have gotten it back?’

She looked up, confused. Garreth looked like he already knew the answer.

‘I – well, I mean, I would have had to ask Uncle Rusuvan, but...’

‘And he wouldn’t have allowed you to, would he?’

Why was he talking about *rings*? What did rings have to do with anything – with his search for the princes, his unforgivable words, the nervousness bubbling in her guts?

‘And then what?’ she said – too snappishly. ‘It’s probably for the best. He knows I always lose everything. It’s better if I –’

‘When have you last lost something?’ Garreth interrupted her.

‘What?’

‘Have you ever lost anything since you were at Copper Coast?’

She blinked, her lips parted halfway an answer she couldn’t find. What kind of a question was that? Of course she had. She *always* did, because she tended to be stupid like that – she just couldn’t think of a decent example now, she had other things to worry about...

‘Zovinar,’ he said – why in the world did he have to sound so tender, so *sweet*? ‘Zovinar, there’s something you need to know – something a friend told me. About your uncle. I know he raised you and I know you probably trust him, but – oh, gods, he might not have your best interests in mind, alright?’

‘What are you *talking* about?’

Garreth hesitated, for a fraction of a moment. Then, lowering the fist with her ring, he bluntly said, 'At least seven men have asked for your hand.'

It took a moment for that sentence to come through.

'What?'

'People *did* want to marry you, Zovinar. Quite a host of them, actually.'

'What do you mean, people wanted to marry me – why wouldn't he have told me?'

'Because,' Garreth said, closing his eyes, 'if you were to marry, you would come home, and if you were to come home, he could no longer play for duke of Tanglewood.'

'What?'

'There's a reason he sent you here just before you turned seventeen. There's a reason he didn't give you access to your ring. There's a reason he told the entire world that you were a silly little girl, not to be trusted with anything – because as long as you'd believe him, he would be ruling that duchy in your place. A husband would ruin his work.'

Zovinar blinked, staring at the fist hiding her ring. And why in the world would I trust *you*, she wanted to spit out – who do *you* think you are to pull me from my sleep and start slandering the man who raised me like a father?

But she had *really* believed the duke of Lionhall might want to marry her, those first months in Copper Coast. He had *told* her he wanted to. And then he had disappeared without a word, and she had thought she'd just been stupid enough to believe him – like she had been stupid enough to believe the marquis of Summervale might truly be interested, or...

Either seven men had all been liars – or her uncle had been.

An option she had never even thought to consider. And yet – *had* she ever lost anything since she had left Tanglewood?

'I'm sorry,' Garreth said quietly. 'I would have told you at a better moment if not for – all of this.'

All of this. His anger, his distrust. Whatever threats had forced him to pack his bags. And yet he hadn't left.

She swallowed. 'How did you get it? My ring?'

'Stole it.'

'What?'

'Still a thief,' he said with a mirthless smile. 'But I doubt the lawyer will cause trouble. Having the bloody thing in his vault was bordering on illegal.'

A strange kind of anger was smouldering in his voice, as if it was *his* duchy on the line, his own ring rotting away in the darkness of a vault. Was that part of the act? But even the best actor in the world would be mad to risk his *life* for the role he was playing, and wasn't that exactly what he had just done?

'And Roark?' she said.

He stiffened. ‘Roark?’

‘What if he realises what you did? That you’re still here?’

‘Ah.’ He coughed. ‘It would – definitely be healthier for a lot of people if he didn’t realise any such thing.’

Zovinar stared at him. He averted his face and added, ‘You – won’t tell him.’

‘Of course I won’t tell him,’ she said sharply. ‘I’m still not –’

‘No. You’re not.’

She opened her mouth to snap an answer back at him – easy to say, isn’t it, now that you’ve had a moment to think about it, to prepare your role? But the defeat in his voice, the shadows on his face. He had stolen her *ring* for her. He had defied the palace guards to tell her about her uncle. If it was true – if he was right...

‘Zovinar...’ Why did that crack in his voice have to sound so genuine? ‘Zovinar, I’m an idiot – worse than an idiot. I allowed my general distrust of the world to take over, and you deserved much, much better than that. I’ll be gone in a minute, I won’t bother you any longer. But you’re not stupid, you really, really aren’t, and you ought to have your own bloody ring and make your own bloody decisions. Take it, will you?’

He reached her his hand again. Zovinar swallowed.

‘Are you really sure?’

‘Write the men you thought might ask for your hand,’ he said, so quickly she knew he had expected the question. ‘Ask for their version of the story. Whatever lies he told them – I suppose they’ll be willing to help.’

Write the men. Yes, she would find the truth that way, and he had to know it. Which meant, if he suggested the option to her –

He couldn’t be lying, could he?

But then it had to be true. Then Uncle Rusuvan had locked her in this place to keep her away from home, had pretended to hold hope some man might propose to her after all – then he had *known* she wouldn’t lose her ring.

Then he had called her stupid for years and *known* she wasn’t so stupid at all.

She reached out in a surge of sudden fury, snatched the ring off Garreth’s palm. The silver felt warm and familiar between her fingers, a feeling of home, a feeling of power – he was right, for hell’s sake, she *could* make her own bloody decisions, she was the duchess of Tanglewood, and if she could sign her own documents, give her own orders – who was going to stop her?

She opened her mouth. Garreth was quicker.

‘Well.’ He stepped back, sounding strangely relieved. ‘Then I suppose I should be going. Eh – I hope you have a...’

‘Wait.’

He froze in his place, halfway a step. Zovinar repeated, more slowly, ‘Wait – I...’

Going. Away from her. Never to return. The thought hadn't seemed so tangible yet – if she turned around now, if she allowed him to pick up his bag and sneak out of these gardens, he would be gone, and she would never see or touch him again. Which should have been fine. She had told herself it would be fine. But he had *stolen* her ring for her, no matter the risks –

‘I – I didn’t thank you yet,’ she said sheepishly.

‘*Thank me?*’ He looked genuinely shocked. ‘Hell’s sake, Zovinar, you shouldn’t –’

‘You stole my ring.’

‘I called you *stupid*.’

‘Yes,’ she said, and took a deep breath. ‘But you won’t do that again, will you?’

‘I...’ A bewildered laugh. ‘No, of course I won’t, but –’

‘And you’ll trust me too?’

‘You lied to *Roark* about me. How could I not trust you after that?’

She really shouldn’t laugh. She should still be angry, she should bid him farewell without looking back – but an overwhelming relief was welling up in her, as if she had just woken up and realised the past four years had been nothing but a bad dream, nothing that needed to be her *life*. She could go back home. She could marry whatever husband she liked – or not marry at all. She could break any rule she wanted, and what was anyone going to do about it?

And he was still here. Bewildered and handsome. The man who had kissed her, and hadn’t been pretending after all. Who had *truly* wanted her. Who was still barely more than a stranger, admittedly – but then again, she knew he was brave, she knew he was a loyal friend, and wasn’t that a little more important than his father’s name and what he liked to eat for breakfast?

‘So – do you have to leave *now*?’

‘What?’ He blinked, then glanced at the sky, his shoulders tensing underneath the linen of his shirt. Still an excellent pair of shoulders, too. ‘I mean – technically I suppose I could wait half an hour.’

‘You could?’

‘Zovinar, what in the world are you up to?’

She barely even hesitated. It didn’t matter she might be saying a hundred stupid things in the next minute alone, that she was thinking of things a respectable young lady shouldn’t even know about, that this entire adventure had to be over and done by the time the first sunrays fell over the horizon – because she was certain of her wishes now, for once she was fully, entirely certain, and what had he said again?

Do you have any idea how beautiful you are when you know what you want?

She looked down. She slipped the ring onto her finger. It fit as if it had been made to measure, as if the silver had waited for her hand to wear it again.

She looked up, and smiled.

‘I want to break some rules.’

CHAPTER 12

*H*e should be going.

He really should have been gone already.

But she was still standing before him, waiting. Her simple blue dress muddy at the hem. Her dark hair flowing over her back and shoulders. The signet ring at her finger.

Most of all, the alarming smile playing around her lips.

It was nothing like that prim, demure smile she had given him in Ulrick's ballroom mere nights ago – this was an invitation, a challenge, a mixture of amusement and temptation with perhaps a dash of recklessness thrown in. Break some rules. For the gods' sake. If he had known at that ball what he was about to unleash...

He might have made a little extra effort, he had to admit.

But the first clouds were already glowing orange and gold above them, she still shouldn't forgive him that easily, and in half an hour he would disappear from her life and never see her again. He should know better than to volunteer as her escape – but knowing better would have been a hundred times easier if not for the lights dancing in her pale blue eyes.

'Zovinar...'

He didn't finish his sentence. She stepped towards him, and he closed his eyes.

'Zovinar, you might regret this.'

'I might.' Hell be damned, why did she need to sound so confident? His body reacted before his sane mind could intervene; the arousal stirred in him at that tone alone, awaking memories of the slender lines of her body, the taste of her pleasure under his lips. 'But I'm far more certain I'll regret letting you go now. So I think I'm picking the best of my odds here.'

He looked up. She stood far too close to him, close enough to hold her if he just reached for her – close enough to distinguish the determined lines around her eyes, the firm curves of her lips. The duchess of Tanglewood. Perhaps he believed it for the first time now.

'You really are horribly irresistible when you know what you want, did I tell you?'

Zovinar threw her arms around his shoulders and planted her mouth on his.

There was nothing careful about this kiss, nothing of last night's gentle harmony. She met him with hot, hungry lips, kissed him as if they had spent the past year apart, as if he had survived bloodshed and battlefields to return to her; her hands found his back, fingers clawing into his muscles as if to mark him hers. The arousal simmering in his loins burst through him at that determined, confident touch – at once he was back in his dark hostel room, holding her in his arms, the taste of her body on his lips. He grew hard against her in an instant. He still should know better – but gods, that small moan she gave him when he slid his fingers around the back of her head and drew her even closer...

She was so soft under his touch, so innocent and yet so shamelessly inviting. Her lips so lusciously sweet. The pressure of her body so infinitely tempting against the bulge of his erection. He wanted nothing more than to devour her again, to make her tremble with pleasure under his lips and take her like he hadn't dared to take her last night – his last chance before he would disappear to hell knew where and never see her again. But she was still a duchess – and he? A thief? An exile?

Without warning her hands slid along his side and hips until her fingers found the band of his trousers. Garreth drew back from their kiss, barely suppressing a curse. 'Zovinar...'

She gave him an innocent, wide-eyed look as she loosened his first button. 'Complaints?'

A breathless laugh fell over his lips. 'I'll disappear on you in minutes. Don't let me –'

'Can't steal what's given freely,' she whispered, and the second button sprang open under her fingers. Garreth closed his eyes. Her soft, careful touches trailing around his groin were nearly too much to take. His desire was pulsing through his veins in red-hot flares of recklessness now, an overwhelming need to be inside her, to make her his for these last few moments they had – *given freely*. Gods be damned.

'You really should know better than to let a man like me...'

'Garreth.' His erection sprang free, so hard it hurt. Her cool fingertips against his scorching flesh nearly sent him to his knees. 'Don't say that. There really is nothing dishonourable about you.'

'Do you have any idea...'

'What you want to do to me?' She giggled quietly, sinking through her knees. 'I think you're giving some clues.'

'But you can't want me...'

Her lips found the tip of his dick, and his mind shut down at once, all sensible objections gone in the haze of his lust. Careful kisses, as if she might hurt him, brushing along his length and back again...

‘Zovinar.’ His voice came out hoarse through gritted teeth. ‘Zovinar, either you stop now or I really can’t promise I’ll keep control of...’

‘Hm?’ she murmured, slipping his tip between her lips.

He gave in. Damn the honour, damn the sense, and damn the sun rising behind his back – he cupped his fingers around the back of her head and guided her as she swallowed him deeper and deeper, cautiously, gingerly, but still so enthrallingly determined. The garden did no longer exist. The paling sky, the arbour, the bag waiting for him in the grass – none of them could pull his mind away from the sight of her, kneeling at his feet and taking him in between her glistening lips. Her tongue circled over his flesh, and lightning bolts fired through him. She pulled back at his involuntary groan, glancing up at him with elated blue eyes.

‘Come here,’ he managed, falling to his knees and pulling her along as he rolled back into the grass. ‘I need you.’

Zovinar moaned as he kissed her and slipped his hands under her skirt. The lines of her body felt nearly familiar to him already, her soft thighs, the dark curls between her legs – but this time he didn’t stop at that most sensitive nub where her lips met. His fingers found the secrets that lay beyond, warm and silky and slippery to the touch already. Again that breathless moan rose from her as he reached her slit, and it was all the encouragement he needed to slowly push into her – oh, gods, to feel her shivering around his finger alone...

‘I should take longer for this,’ he whispered, bending over her to kiss her. ‘If I had the time –’

‘Doesn’t matter.’ She gasped as he pulled out of her again. ‘Do it.’

His painful arousal was screaming at him to delve into her, not to waste another minute without her. Somehow he held back. ‘It may hurt a little. It –’

‘*Garreth.*’ Half laugh, half moan. ‘I’m not stupid. Do it.’

He fell back into the grass without an answer, rolling her on top of him so that she straddled him, her skirt covering his thighs and chest. Holding up his erection with one hand, he positioned her on her knees with the other, until her slippery entrance lay against his tip and he’d only have to thrust up to take her.

‘Come.’ It took all his self-restraint to stay down. The gleam in her eyes seemed to be begging him to have her, hard and urgent. ‘You determine how fast you go. If it hurts...’

She was already lowering herself over him, impaling herself on his dick, taking him in so deliciously slowly that he thought the tension might shatter him. Her body gripped him so tightly it was almost painful. Then, abruptly, she pushed through, with a small yelp of pain – and he was in her, all of him, buried into her clenching warmth. Leaning over him, Zovinar laughed, a sound like sparkling gemstones.

‘This really is the funniest feeling...’

Garreth managed a breathless laugh, coming up on his elbows to kiss her. She bent over and rose from his dick in the same movement, then slowly sank back the moment their lips met. Locked in her velvet embrace, he fell back into the grass and closed his eyes as she rode him with cautious restraint, faster and faster, breathing in jagged gasps. Unbearable bliss rose in him – pure, unthinkable bliss – until abruptly the tension in his body erupted and he burst into her, with a rough cry that seemed to rise from the tips of his toes...

He found her beaming down at him as he came to his senses again, her smile bright enough to outshine the golden sky. The duchess of Tanglewood. His, for this blissful moment. Without words he reached for her and pulled her against his chest, breathing the faint scent of her arousal and her minty perfume and his own sweat.

‘Zovinar...’

‘I quite like the sounds you’re making,’ she muttered, nestling herself against him. ‘Hope you enjoy them as much as I do.’

He burst out laughing. ‘I doubt there’s anything I enjoy more, if you want to know.’

‘Was that a challenge?’

‘I won’t object if you interpret it as such.’

She buried his face into his chest and clutched her arms around him. Garreth closed his eyes. Somewhere in the background of his mind he was still vaguely aware he shouldn’t be here at all – that he should have left hours ago, that he was being reckless at best and senseless at worst. But every muscle in his body seemed convinced that, as a matter of fact, this was the only place in the world where he ought to be right now: in a silent lavender garden, covered by the weight of her body, holding her as if she belonged to him. Hell’s sake, he *wanted* her to belong to him. What was the point in being a one-time escape when there was so much he still wanted to make her feel, so much of her he still wanted to see?

The first sunrays found them as she lay there on his chest, entangled in her own skirts. She had to feel the warmth through the thin linen of her dress, but she didn’t get up, didn’t pull her arms away from him.

‘Zovinar,’ he whispered.

Her arms tensed in his sides. ‘I know.’

Then they were both silent again, Neither of them moved.

‘Do you even know where you’re going?’ she said, still talking into his shirt. Garreth wanted to curse. Going. From her lips it sounded twice as real, and twice as unpleasant.

‘Not really. I could write you by the time I know.’

‘You – could,’ she said, but she sounded hesitant. He stiffened underneath her body. Of course, what was he thinking? He was still just an escape, an accomplice to her newfound rebellion. She’d find someone else, someone who wasn’t miles away from her; his letters might only be a burden.

‘Don’t you want me to?’

On his chest, she abruptly looked up. ‘What? No – no, that’s not what I meant. I was just thinking – you won’t have to write me if you – well...’

She hesitated. Garreth came up a few inches to look her in the eyes, but she avoided his gaze.

‘Zovinar, I still won’t think you’re stupid.’

‘No,’ she said, a little dazed. ‘No, I suppose you won’t.’

‘So what is it?’

Again she was silent for a moment. Then, abruptly, she blurted out, ‘You could come to Tanglewood.’

He jolted up, rolling her off him in the same movement. ‘*Tanglewood?*’

‘I mean – it’s just over the border.’ She still didn’t look him in the eyes. ‘You could look for Marick from there, and then at least you won’t have to sleep in ratty hostels.’

‘Yes, but I doubt your uncle will happily welcome me.’

‘He doesn’t have to. I will.’

‘But you’re...’

‘I could come with you to Tanglewood.’

He fell silent, staring at her. Glanced at the ring on her left hand. Turned back to meet her gaze. Opened his mouth, and closed it again.

‘What else am I going to do?’ she added, sheepishly. ‘Stay here? After all that’s happened these days – how do you want me to dance around in pretty dresses for another year?’

‘Zovinar, wait – of course you should go home and have a damn good word with that uncle of yours, but...’ He sucked in a breath. ‘You barely know me. You...’

‘I’d like to know you better.’

‘Yes, but...’

‘And I’ll get scared as soon as Uncle Rusuvan starts shouting. I’d like you to be there. I want to dance with you again. And...’ She glanced at her rumpled skirts, a blush rising on her face. ‘I don’t think I’d mind doing these things a little more often, either.’

A slow grin grew on his face, the relief swelling in him so rapidly that it nearly hurt. ‘Every time I think I’ve seen the maddest of you...’

She blinked. ‘Do you mind?’

‘Goods gods, no. The opposite.’ He pulled her back against him again and kissed her cheek, her forehead, the crown of her head. ‘But you’re sounding more *and* less like a duchess with every next word you speak, somehow.’

Her blush turned even darker. ‘I’m sure I’ll get better at both with a little practice.’

‘Probably,’ he said, grinning. ‘And I can hardly decline a chance to witness your progress, can I?’

‘So you’re – you’re coming?’

‘Of course I’m coming.’ The sunlight was streaming over the garden now, shrouding the grass and the lavender in a deep golden glow. His heart was pounding so vigorously in his chest that he felt nearly dizzy on it. ‘I just need to get out of this place without being noticed, but...’

‘You’ll manage that, won’t you?’

‘I’ll manage. Don’t worry.’ He still knew the hole in the fence. The paths avoiding the city, the shepherds’ huts where he had taken shelter from the rain during his rides and walks with the brothers. ‘If you can arrange horses, we can meet anywhere outside the city whenever you’re ready to leave.’

She glanced over her shoulder. She turned back to him. She smiled so broadly that her face appeared too small for it.

‘Tonight?’

‘Tonight.’ He sucked in a breath. Warm, fuzzy euphoria was filling him. ‘Well. Why not?’

And even her kiss was a thousand times sweeter knowing it wouldn’t be the last one after all.

The End

AFTERWORD

Hi lovely reader, Lisette here!

I hope you enjoyed reading this story as much as I enjoyed writing it! The world of the Five Kingdoms has existed in my imagination for years, so I'm beyond excited to finally write down all the steamy, passionate stories taking place in its courts and castles. *The Spinster & The Thief* is the first, but definitely not the last of them – many more characters are waiting in my mind to find the love of their life, from princes and queens to spies and even the occasional assassin.

Apart from Zovinar and Garreth, you have already met one character who'll cause quite the political uproar soon: Princess Viviette of the Peaks. Her story is the next to be told! As a matter of fact, she'll get a full trilogy, which will be published in the summer of 2021 – a steamy, riveting tale of a stubborn princess with a knack for solving mysteries, a cold spy with a dangerous past and a looming threat of war.

So do you love old secrets, deadly court intrigues and sizzling enemies to lovers romance? Below you find the first chapters of *Velvet*, book 1 of *The Princess & The Spy*. Enjoy! ☐☐

Love,
Lisette

VELVET
THE PRINCESS & THE SPY

Viviette's story – coming Summer 2021
Read the first chapters of Velvet below...



PROLOGUE

*V*iviette. Princess of the Peaks. Home again, after three years at a foreign court.

A joyous occasion, the crowd gathered on the courtyard below seemed to believe. Jaghar stood at his bedroom window and watched the nobles and diplomats, knights and guards, servants and even some townsfolk from the other side of the crevice, their eyes all following the blinded coach being escorted into the castle by three rows of knights. The scene was a clutter of colours and sounds, a nightmare for any guard or spy trying to maintain some level of security – but the excitement of her return had built up in Rock Hall and the town for weeks, and not even the howling spring winds could dissuade the stream of spectators.

The coach, still surrounded by its guardians, came to a halt on the crude stone paving of the courtyard. The door opened amidst an outburst of deafening cheering, and people at the back of the crowd jostled to catch a glimpse of the girl in the furlined dress as she stepped out and smiled at the welcome.

Well.

She was home.

She looked well, he had to admit. Someone in Copper Coast had at least taught her to properly do her hair; she wore it in two dark braids now, which hung to her waist and made her look a decade more mature than those wild curls of earlier years. She greeted her father with a curtsy appropriate for the situation, too. Before she left to Copper Coast, she would have fallen into the king's arms as if no one was looking. All in all, the first glance suggested that King Ulrick's court had done its job better than Jaghar had dared to hope. Some manners on her would at least be helpful in the search for a suitable husband, someone who would be able to rule the kingdom after Trystan died.

Outside Viviette was now shaking the hands of some Rock Hall nobles, a bright smile on her dainty face. By the look of her tilted head, she was asking some questions – of *course* she was asking questions. Had she ever done anything else? *What are you doing, Spymaster? Did anything happen today? Is it true there are dragons in Andrough? Is that man over there a spy? Does he work for you? Why is your knife made of ivory?* That damned interrogation habit alone had been a fine

reason to send her off to some faraway castle for her education; it seemed unhealthily optimistic to hope the Copper Coast society had rid her of that dreadful tendency as well.

Jaghar closed his eyes for a second. He really wouldn't have minded leaving her in the west for some more years. If the threat of war hadn't stuck up its ugly head...

From a political point of view, he knew, he should be happy she'd even managed to reach her own kingdom safely – but it left him indifferent at best from every other perspective.

On the courtyard, Viviette exchanged a few last words with an old lady, then took her father's arm to walk inside. Jaghar sank down on the cold granite of his windowsill without bothering to keep his eyes on her – there was no need for it. His people would trace every footstep inside the castle and report to him this evening. He would have to make his appearance only in an hour or so, on the king's request, to explain to Viviette the safety measures they had taken to keep her protected despite the hostile diplomats walking around the castle.

Jaghar closed his eyes and muttered a curse. At the very least he hoped she wouldn't start asking questions about *them*, too.

He wasn't going to say a thing about Mauno, at least. Not a word, if he could avoid it.

CHAPTER 1

‘It sounds as if you had a wonderful time in Copper Coast,’ her father said.

This was a somewhat surprising conclusion to Viviette. Sitting under her old woollen blanket, in the familiar windowsill of her bedroom, she had spent three quarters of an hour narrating tales about young noblewomen with no other occupations than gossiping about each other’s dresses, and about balls where two incorrect dance steps could fuel days of scandals, and about governesses who had explained time and time again that young women of her stature had no business being ‘clever,’ as that might deter potential husbands. The only wonderful part of Copper Coast had been the trips to the red dunes and the swirling sea behind – and even those had more often than not been spoiled by cocky young men who attempted to win her heart by comparing her eyes to emeralds, or her skin to marble, or her hair to raven feathers.

‘Raven feathers?’ she’d asked that last one. ‘You mean, somewhat ragged and covered in bits and pieces of corpses?’

This, lady Crisanta had reprimanded her during the next day’s lessons, most certainly fell under the denomination of ‘being clever’.

Viviette said none of that to her father, however. He knew she loved the majestic wildness of the mountains, the songs of the wind between the ragged peaks, the cold, crisp air, and the silence of Rock Hall. She had told him in no uncertain terms, too, that the political game of his court was much more appealing to her than the latest news on Imperial sleeve fashion. If he chose to believe that his decision to send her to Copper Coast had been a successful one nonetheless, there was little use in repeating the opposite.

He looked so hopeful, too. With the bags under his eyes and the first grey hairs appearing in his dark beard, she didn’t have the heart to disappoint him.

‘I learned a lot,’ she said. That, at least, was true, and he looked rather relieved.

‘Crisanta wrote me that you were making a lot of progress.’

‘I tried to.’ If she could have convinced them that her education had been finished, perhaps they would have allowed her to return to the Peaks sooner. ‘But I am really very happy to be home again too, Father.’

A smile broke through on his face – the familiar fatherly smile he had given her when he had taught her to read and drawn little cats in the margins of her books. ‘I’m glad to hear, Vivi. I’m very happy to see you again, too – although the circumstances, of course...’

From a political point of view, Viviette knew, she was supposed to be deeply concerned about the threat of war on the Peaks – but if she was honest, she had spent several hours suppressing the broadest of smiles when her father’s knights had arrived at the Copper Coast court to take her home.

‘Yes,’ she said, with a tactical sigh. ‘Would you mind telling me how that situation is faring? I thought I saw some Taavi and Androughan diplomats on the courtyard?’

Her father clucked his tongue, turning around in his chair at the hearth to steal a glance at the door. ‘Yes, they have been here for two weeks now, an attempt to find some diplomatic solution to the tensions – but let’s talk about that in a couple of minutes, Vivi. I asked Jaghar to join us around this time to inform you about the security measures we have taken.’

Viviette frowned. ‘I don’t suppose you need Jaghar to tell me about the current state of events here, do you?’

He tilted his head. ‘The current state of events?’

‘There’s a Taavi army demanding that you allow them access to our mountain passes so they can attack Andrough,’ she said, with a wide gesture at the south. ‘There’s an Andrough army threatening to attack you if you allow the Taavi to attack them through that route, too. I suppose things are happening? Negotiations? Tactics and strategies? Are you...’

She was interrupted by a curt knock. Before she could react, her father already yelled, ‘Yes?’

Jaghar stepped inside, dressed in his simple black uniform, his sharp face a cool mask – the face of a man who considered every feeling to be a weakness. He didn’t seem to have grown a day older in the past three years. Only his silver-blond hair had perhaps grown another inch. Time clearly hadn’t softened his feelings about her, either; his nod in her direction didn’t show a hint of relief at her safe return.

‘Princess.’

Jaghar was the only one who called her Princess, like he called her father King rather than Your Majesty – a custom in the north, she had understood, and one of the few habits which still betrayed his Androughan origins. She smiled an icy smile back at him.

‘Spymaster.’

There was no ‘I hope you are well’. No ‘Welcome back to Rock Hall’. He did not sit down, either; comfort, like feelings, seemed to be something he reserved for the weak. Standing beside the door, in the most shadowy part of the room, he only said, ‘The king asked me to summarise our current security measures to you.’

‘Very kind,’ Viviette said, although she admittedly said it in a tone that Crisanta would say reeked of cleverness. She saw her father frown in the corner of her eye. Jaghar, predictably, did not react.

‘A number of foreign diplomats are staying in Rock Hall at the moment. Most importantly, Lord Karlan is here to advocate the Androughan side of the conflict, and Mauno and his delegation are pushing for the Taavi agenda. Now, as the king probably told you, there is some suspicion that both of these parties might go to unusual lengths to protect their interests...’

She glanced at her father. ‘Such as kidnapping me from Copper Coast court to force your decisions?’

He gave her a tired smile. ‘For example.’

‘Why do you even allow them in Rock Hall if you consider them capable of such things?’

‘Because the alternative is slighting the Taavi Empress to the extent that she might simply take the passes by force,’ Jaghar said before her father could answer. ‘Or, if we allowed only the Taavi delegates to enter the castle, slighting the Androughan warlords to the point where they might invade the Peaks if only to be quicker than the Taavi army waiting to attack them. But you are not incorrect that there is, of course, a risk.’

Not incorrect. If that was the closest he could come to acknowledging she had a point, not much had improved indeed in the last three years.

‘Well,’ she said, taking a breath. ‘So how did you plan to prevent them from sticking a spear through me during dinner?’

‘It would be appreciated if you could manage not to draw too much attention,’ Jaghar said coldly. ‘That is to say, don’t be too present. On the other hand, don’t be too absent either – hiding you would only tell people that the king is afraid for your safety, which might give them ideas. I suggest you try to find some compromise.’

Ah. Be pretty but quiet, he could as well have said. Stand around whenever you’re expected to stand around, but never say anything sensible – if you must say anything at all. Have pleasant conversations with people seated next to you at dinner, but don’t you dare address anyone by your own initiative.

Be the girl Copper Coast has trained you to be: a lovely piece of decoration.

She looked at her father. His face stood tired and concerned, but he didn’t look uncomfortable in the slightest – no traces that Jaghar had somehow convinced him against his better instincts to treat his only heir like he might have treated the dinner hall’s flower arrangements. Was this all he dared to expect from her?

Perhaps this was only a matter of security, she tried to reassure herself. Perhaps he simply didn’t want his *enemies* to believe he thought better of her, because they might target her if they knew...

But she would have to ask him on his own. Not while Jaghar was staring down on her, with his empty black eyes and the impatient lines of his jaws.

‘That is clear,’ she said, looking back at the Spymaster. Her line of thought had delayed her answer only with a fraction of a second, but he raised an eyebrow nonetheless.

‘You seem hesitant.’

‘I thought you’d prefer getting a well-considered answer.’

A shadow of annoyance passed over his face. ‘I see. Do you have any particular considerations about my people keeping an eye on you whenever you leave your room, too?’

‘Only when I leave my room?’ she said, unable to keep a hint of spite from her voice. She had a *lot* of considerations about this point, as a matter of fact, none of which her father would like her to put forward. ‘An outrageous amount of freedom. You’re not even afraid that Lord Karlan will climb in through my window to introduce me to his spearhead, I understand?’

Jaghar didn’t flinch. ‘If you prefer us to monitor your room as well, we’ll be happy to oblige, Princess.’

‘Terribly considerate, Spymaster. I don’t suppose you will be as accommodating in case I’d wish for *less* surveillance on my person?’

Her father intervened before Jaghar could answer. ‘I suggest you trust Jaghar to decide on the minimum of surveillance necessary to guarantee your safety, Vivi.’

She sucked in a breath. ‘As you wish.’

Jaghar’s face remained an unmovable mask. Even a glimpse of triumph would have been better than this impenetrable wall of coldness – at least it would have made him *human*.

‘Thank you, Vivi,’ her father said with a rather pressing glance in her direction. ‘Jaghar, are there other measures of which Viviette should be aware?’

The Spymaster examined her as if he were assessing the value of some piece of weaponry. What are you trying to figure out, she wanted to snap – if I can keep my mouth shut to men who might be plotting to invade my kingdom? How stupid do you think I am? But with her father in the chair at the hearth, she didn’t speak a word.

‘In all fairness,’ Jaghar said flatly, ‘I believe the princess will be safer with as little knowledge as possible.’

A heat flushed through her. *The princess* – as if she weren’t even sitting in the same room.

‘Could you explain to me what exactly you mean, Spymaster?’ she said, forcing her voice to remain icily polite. ‘Do you expect I’d run out to tell Sir Mauno exactly how many secrets I’m keeping from—’

‘Thank you, Jaghar,’ her father interrupted her, a tad too loud. ‘I think we have discussed all necessary points. I’ll see you after my conversation with Mauno this afternoon.’

With a curt nod, Jaghar turned around and disappeared. As soon as the door clicked shut, her father said, 'Vivi...'

She turned around in the windowsill, focussing her eyes on the rope bridges over the abyss that separated the two halves of Rock Hall. Anger pulsed through her veins. Barely an hour since her return, and already the jerk managed to spoil every spark of joy she had felt at the reunion with her home. Why hadn't he just ignored her like he used to do when she was younger? At least that had been better than this blatant hostility.

'Vivi, I know he is not your favourite person in the world...'

Viviette bit out a joyless laugh. 'You can hardly berate me for being impolite if he can barely bring up the heart to *greet* me.'

'He's not a man for pleasant chats and polite lies, but...'

But at least he has another function in the world? Whereas being pleasant and polite is all you two think I'm good for? She clenched her teeth and said, 'I wouldn't ask him to *lie*, but it would be significantly easier to be polite if he at least didn't treat me like a twelve-year-old child.'

'I'm sure that is not his intention, Vivi.'

A rather inexplicable thing to be sure of. 'If you say so.'

A silence fell. Outside, miles away from the cliff on which Rock Hall was built, she noticed two giant eagles soaring past the slopes, the white feathers of their heads shining in the watery autumn sun. Below them, the valleys lay hidden under a thick layer of clouds. Would the villages down there be preparing for the threat of war already? Another question she wanted to ask, and feared she wouldn't get an answer to.

When she didn't turn back to him, her father sighed.

'Vivi, can you please believe me if I promise you he *is* a good man? A dangerous man, admittedly – but a good man.'

It would be easier to believe him if the Spymaster had ever shown a glimpse of kindness, or at least something other than cool disinterest and distant sarcasm. Yes, she had heard the rumours about his past – they said he was not even twenty yet when he came to Rock Hall, but that he had fought dragons in the west of Andrough before he met her father, had seen the forbidden lakes of Redwood, had stolen his ivory knife from a witch and survived the encounter, too. But she had never even seen him smile, and didn't that say more about the contents of his character?

'I'll try to believe you,' she said, 'but it would be helpful if you could give me *some* reason to.'

'I've never met any man so determined to keep Rock Hall safe,' her father said. His voice still sounded calm, but she knew by the emphatic undertone that he was getting impatient. 'He finds information earlier Spymasters couldn't even dream to get their hands on. I know for a fact that he would give his life to protect us. I hope

you'll forgive me for prioritizing those points to his conversation methods.'

Viviette sighed and turned back to look at him. There was no anger in his eyes – as green as hers, the colour that had run in the royal family as long as the history books remembered. Perhaps she had taken too much meaning from Jaghar's orders. Perhaps her father at least thought of her as more than some pretty pawn to be married off as soon as possible. Perhaps he *was* going to treat her like his only heir and prepare her for her future like she had seen King Ulrick prepare his stepson for his days on the throne.

'Thank you, father,' she said, and she took care to sound as reasonable as possible. 'I will keep that in mind.'

He gave her a tired smile. 'Thank you, Vivi.'

'And apart from Jaghar...' She leaned back against the cold wall, suppressing a shiver. 'Could you explain some more about the background of the conflict? Because I don't want to make mistakes whenever I have to speak with...'

'It's better if you don't speak about politics with any foreign diplomats at all, Vivi.'

'Of course, but...'

'And apart from the general gist of the situation, there is little I can tell you except...'

'All you said about the matter was that the Taavi are trying to get their army through the passes and that the Androughan don't want them to succeed,' she said, speaking too fast in her impatience and disappointment. 'So why does the Empress want to attack Andrough in the first place? How are they trying to convince you to allow them through? What are our weak spots? What is the opinion of the other Kingdoms? There's so much you didn't—'

'Vivi,' he interrupted her with a sigh, and got up. 'These are all subjects for other moments. You should take a bath and allow yourself some time to recover from the journey. Tomorrow evening we'll organise a ball to celebrate your return. There will be Taavi and Androughan around as well, but you shouldn't worry. Simply don't discuss politics with any of them. And until that time, you should—'

'Shut up and look pretty?' she suggested sharply.

The lines on his face deepened, but he held out his arms to her like he had done when she was twelve years old.

'You're upsetting yourself about matters that are not your burden to bear, little girl. Please leave the politics to me. There's nothing you can do to help now. I'll explain it all when it is over, I promise.'

She returned his hug, but didn't respond.

'You're tired,' he eventually said, stepping back and giving her another fatherly smile, although this one didn't reach his eyes. 'Take some time to rest – I'll see you again after my appointment with Sir Mauno. I'm looking forward to hearing more of your stories about Copper Coast.'

There's nothing you can do to help.

Viviette took off her old travel dress. She took out her braids. She cleaned her skin and her nails, washed her armpits, and scrubbed her face. None of those routine gestures could erase her father's voice from the back of her head, as if he had fixed himself in her ears with ropes and hooks, like climbers fixed themselves on the mountain ridges.

Not your burden.

Clean and naked she fell onto her bed, inhaling the ever-familiar scent of coarse wool and mountain herbs, pinewood and mountain winds. The anger rose in her slowly but steadily, like the flood coming up on the Copper Coast beaches. It streamed through her, cold as sea water. It took possession of her as if she were drowning.

Little girl.

It had been three years since he sent her off to Copper Coast. Three years since she had told him, clearly and repeatedly, that she didn't want to learn about embroidery and drying flowers and playing the harp – not if she could also learn the skills she *would* need by the time Rock Hall's silk cloak was draped around her shoulders. But none of it had made him listen, and now that she was finally back where she belonged, rather than explaining to her what mortal danger had made him decide she should come back to the Peaks, her father wanted her to tell him about *Copper Coast*? The place where a badly tuned harp had been scandalous enough to provide conversation for weeks?

Viviette laughed out loud as she sat up, a cutting, bitter laugh. He might as well have told her that he didn't consider her capable enough to be his kingdom's next ruler.

So what was she to do now?

Sit in her room until dinner? Arrive at the ball tomorrow in some lacy, sparkling dress too cold for this climate and have pleasant conversations about pleasant subjects with people who might well be invading her borders a week after? Play the empty-headed doll until her father found someone suitable to be her husband, and allow that man to tell her there was nothing she could do for the rest of her life?

She bit out a few words that would have made Crisanta gasp, had she been within hearing distance.

Yes, she would have to marry to even be allowed on the throne of her kingdom. Yes, her future husband would hopefully be capable enough to understand politics. But she wasn't going to be a pretty puppet only suitable to, in Crisanta's words, provide her lord and master with the bodily pleasures he needed – she had eyes and ears and a functioning brain too, and if her father didn't want to prepare her...

Gods be damned, then she was going to prepare herself.

She was standing before she had fully made her plan, grabbing a simple woollen dress from the closet. It still fit, albeit slightly less loosely than before the years in Copper Coast. No shoes, she decided, the sounds of the sturdy soles might betray her. But her bare feet would freeze in the cold corridors... A pair of thick socks would do. Finally she pulled a ribbon from the drawer of her dressing table and bound up her long black locks to keep them out of her face.

Then she locked the bedroom door from the inside. Better to make sure the servants wouldn't disturb her.

The tapestry beside her bed hadn't been moved in the last three years. She pulled the richly decorated forest scenery aside – so unlike the barren mountaintops outside – and revealed a bare stone wall. Her fingers found their way over the bumps and ridges of the granite blocks as if she hadn't been gone for more than a few nights. There was the shallow crack... She pushed her fingertips inside and pulled, to be rewarded with a few nearly inaudible clicks as the mechanism inside the wall started turning.

The secret door slid open. Behind it, the passage was dark and dusty as it had always been.

Viviette grabbed the nearest lantern from her wall and took a deep breath. Appointment with Sir Mauno, her father had said. Where would he meet with a Taavi knight? Not in his personal rooms, and not in his study either, where maps and notes might give his plans away. Not in the main hall, because the conversation would likely be private. So – the green room?

Probably the green room. And she knew how to get there.

After some fifteen yards, the secret corridor ended in another wall of blank stone. Viviette put down her lantern and pushed two nearly invisible buttons on both sides. Again some clicks, and a door slid open. Left. Left again. Down a staircase where one clumsy step would likely break her neck. She was just above the hall now. Through the thin ventilation cracks she could distinguish the clamour of voices.

Up the next flight of stairs. Through another secret door – it had taken her two weeks to figure out this one's opening mechanism, just around her fourteenth birthday. From here on, it would be an easy walk to find the secret door leading to the green room, which was, like all these doors, hidden behind a tapestry to those sitting inside. If she opened it, she would be able to hear the full conversation inside without anyone noticing.

One corner. Nearly there. She put down her lantern – the light shouldn't betray her – and walked on, rounding the last corner...

A sudden explosion of movements in the dark. A warm hand clenched over her mouth before she could scream, strong arms pulling her backwards. Someone slammed her against the painfully rough walls of Rock Hall's hidden corridors, and protruding stones hit her spine in several unpleasant ways; she cried out, her voice

muffled by the fingers nearly squeezing through her jaw. Behind her, someone muttered a curse.

An Androughan curse.

Viviette pulled away from the hand over her face, reflexively. Then, blinking the tears from her eyes, she recognised her assailant – silvery blond hair, simple black clothes no nobleman would ever wear, and a hard, sharp face with eyes like a hawk's...

Those hawk eyes recognised her at the same moment. Jaghar abruptly let go of her, his lip curled up as if to bite her, and hissed, '*Princess?*'

To be continued...